

the third alternative

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poetry by
Kat Ricker
Tim Allen
Albert Russo
Brian Maycock
artwork by Alan Casey

fiction by
Neil Williamson
David Logan
Andrew Hook
Alan Casey
Roger Stone
Gary Couzens
Rhys H Hughes

THE THIRD ALTERNATIVE

Issue 6 • Spring 95

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ALL ARTWORK: *Alan Casey*

Congratulations to Lawrence & Christine Dyer on the arrival of baby daughter Madeleine. I'm pleased to report that mother, daughter & father are all doing fine ■ The Penguin edition of Nicholas Royle's first novel **Counterparts** was published on March 2nd & is in all good bookshops. Buy it! ■ A book of poetry by Ingrid Riley, **Kaleidoscope World**, is published by Community of Poets Press in March 95. ISBN 0 9525304 06, 36pp, £2 net, available from 18 Uplands, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7BL ■ Despite recent relocation Dave Logan's **Grotesque** continues to appear on schedule. Issue 7 features quality strange fiction from Neal Asher, William Meikle, Rhys Hughes, DF Lewis, Jessica Anderson & others. £2.80 or £10/4, from 39 Brook Avenue, off Barn Road, Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, N Ireland BT38 7TE ■ Andy Cox is now offering joint subscriptions to **The Third Alternative** & **Zene**: £14, payable to either magazine, gets you four issues of each. Editorial address on page 2 ■ **Zene** #3 is out now. Massive issue features guidelines from UK, USA, Canada; competitions; reviews; news; views; varied articles; etc. £1.95 or £7/4 payable to 'Zene', or see above (same address applies). Issue 4 will feature an in-depth interview with Rupert Loydell, whose collection of prose **Stone Angels** is out now, & includes 'Only Shadows' from TTA1. See the ad on the inside back cover for further details ■ The June 23rd issue of **The New Statesman** will come with a slipstream fiction supplement, featuring many writers TTA readers will be very familiar with ■ Issue 5 of Wayne Edwards' series of anthologies **Palace Corbie** is now available. Top quality horror fiction & poetry from forty talented writers. \$10.95 (check for overseas rates) from Merrimack Books, PO Box 83514, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501-3514, USA ■ Elsie Gadsby, perhaps TTA's oldest subscriber at 83, has a book of poems published now called **Memories and Melodies**, in which she recollects events from her life. £2.50 inc p&p from Elsie Gadsby, Kirkhallam Nursing Home, Oliver Road, Kirkhallam, Ilkeston, Derbyshire DE7 4JL ■ *Please always mention **The Third Alternative** when replying to news and ads*

Welcome to TTA6. You will notice immediately the amount of artwork in this issue, and you will notice that despite a recent editorial it's actually illustrated. Not that I ever had a major gripe with illustration at all, just infuriating 'spot illos' that are chucked into the middle of a passage of text for no apparent reason other than a condescending, false assumption that readers need it broken up. That the offending drawing is often totally irrelevant to the text seems to be considered, well, irrelevant. One problem that illustration *does* have, however, is that it sometimes merely tells the story, even to the extent of giving the ending away.

Whether this is deliberate editorial policy and thus restrictive to the artists is something to ponder, but here, in TTA6, both Alan Casey and myself were keen to avoid those traps, and as a result much of what you see herein could be considered interpretative rather than illustrative. I think Alan has done an excellent job, especially when I consider the speed at which he works.

Next issue sees a return to the more usual practice of stand-alone artwork, as we'll be showcasing six brilliant full-page pieces by another TTA discovery David Checkley, the first time his work has ever seen print.

On the whole, thanks to people like Dave Mooring and Ben Mitchell, the artwork in TTA has come in for a lot of praise, not least from subscribers. Although we haven't used much in the past, it's down to their talents that artwork has now fully come into its own in TTA, and has achieved that level of importance I always hoped it would. Because of this I thought it might be a good idea to make artists' work available in A4 poster format, steel plate litho printed onto glossy paper—unfortunately not all the details have been ironed out by the time this issue goes to press, but I'm sure it would prove a popular venture. Watch this space.

Meanwhile I hope you enjoy this issue, and trust that you'll all be here for TTA7.

CAGES

NEIL WILLIAMSON

"Hello, Wilson. It's me, Jericho."

The old man's eyes surveyed me blankly through the narrow crack; dull grey, blinking, once, twice, and then gone as the door closed again. My heart sank. I thought maybe he was having one of those days where he didn't recognise me, and I would have to endure the process of introducing myself again and jog his memory until he remembered me. I called his name again and raised my hand to knock a second time, but stopped when I heard the tentative jangle and clack of the security chain being removed.

The door swung inwards at my touch. The tiny hallway was deserted. Old Wilson could move fast enough when he wanted. I hefted the grocery bags into the crook of my arm so I could close the door and took them into the kitchenette.

"I got everything you wanted, but they only had plain flour and they'd run out of baking powder. Have you got any here?" I paused putting the groceries away, waiting for an answer. It came eventually, indistinct.

"Doesn't matter."

I shrugged and returned my attention to the groceries.

"What is it you're making anyway? A cake or something?"

No answer, so I went through. I didn't see him right away, but then he turned his head slowly towards me and I saw that he was there in his armchair as always. The curtains were drawn, diffusing the light, leeching what little colour there was from the room. I ached

to throw them wide open, but Wilson would complain like hell if I did. In the dim grey light it was hard to discern between his grey skin and his grey clothes and the threadbare grey fabric of the old armchair. As I passed the window, I brushed the curtain gently, briefly allowing a hard bar of light to probe the room, touch his face, and he flinched as it struck. In that second of illumination I saw that he was crying.

He had been looking at the canary in the cage which sat in the corner. Its name was Buster. The first time I saw it, it had looked dreadfully thin, but it still had most of its feathers and chirped occasionally. In the intervening weeks it had lost still more weight. Now it lay weakly on the bottom of the cage beside its water dish, on a carpet of its own feathers. It was not yet dead. I could see the rapid rise and fall of its delicate rib cage, the occasional blink of a helpless eye. In the two months I had been visiting Wilson I could not remember ever seeing him feed the bird. In the cage there was water, yes, but no food. I could well believe it was starving to death.

I don't think Wilson was a cruel man. Senile, forgetful to the point of neglect, perhaps. But not intentionally cruel. It was a desperately sad thing, but even so I found it hard to stomach.

"Oh, Wilson," I sighed, reaching a finger through the bars to stroke the bird. It was trembling. "Look at him. We need to get him to a vet." I looked back at the old man. He had not moved. "When did you last feed him?"

"Feed him?" His gaze travelled back to the cage. His voice was small, as if from a long distance. "I've run out of seed."

I made to reach for the handle of the cage, saying, "I don't suppose it matters. I'll take him away right now and get him some attention, okay? He'll be right as rain tomorrow."

"No!" The sheer unexpected volume of his voice stopped me. Like a crack of thunder from a cloudless blue sky, so out of place in this oppressively quiet room. Wilson was looking at me, his eyes incongruously bright, like new things set amid his faded paper features. He and I both knew there was no vet. Not for people like us.

The way he held my gaze froze me there until he spoke again. His voice, returning to its normal pitch, held a keening note close to pleading.

"Don't take him, Jericho. It'll be alright if you get the seed. Just don't take him away. I need him here with me."

He got up and shuffled over to the sideboard where he rummaged around in a drawer for a minute or so. Eventually he emerged triumphant. In one hand he clutched a very crumpled piece of paper. He smoothed it out, before pressing it into my fist. There was an address written on it. A West End address, across the river. It would take me hours to walk up there and back.

"That's where to buy the seed."

"Wilson," I said as gently as I could, although in truth I was getting a little impatient with him. I could see little point. The bird was probably too weak to eat solids by now. Best just to let me take it away and put it out of its misery. "That's miles away. Buster might die before I get back."

He looked up at me levelly for a good thirty seconds, as if I were a slow student missing the point, before he said, "I might die before you get back. But I don't want to. I haven't been out of this

building for twelve years. Hardly even out of this room, out of this chair here. And I've always had my Buster. Lynn understood."

He pressed a thick wad of notes into my other hand. I protested,

"This is too much, surely..." but he stopped me with a tired hand on my bare arm. His skin was cool and uncomfortably smooth; worn.

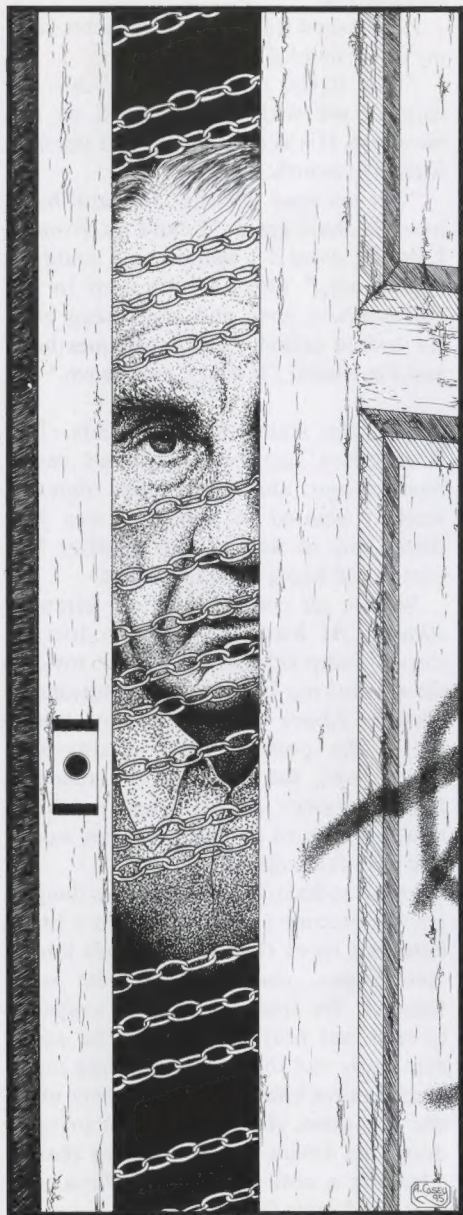
"Get my seed. Please." He sank back into his chair again. "I can't go. Even if I was fit, even if I wanted to, I couldn't. This room..." There was despair in his countenance now, and something else. He looked afraid. "I'm a prisoner here and I'm scared I'll never, ever leave."

I took the stairs; eleven flights. The lifts had last been repaired seven months ago, and had lasted about a week. I wanted to believe I was just doing this to humour his senility but part of me knew what he meant.

We are all confined by our circumstances. At least the we who live in these damp-ridden concrete towers, slowly sinking into the ever gluttonous Thames. Above the high tide mark and below the poverty line, sharing our homes with the rats and the roaches. Social Services' answer when you have nowhere else to go. Well, no one would live here from choice.

Lynn understood. She was his daughter. We became lovers soon after I came here; but more than that, I don't know, companions, *soulmates*. At least so I thought. We traded dreams attempting to raise our horizons beyond the concrete walls and the ever expanding mud-flats. I never knew she had a father until she was gone, chasing her own private, desperate dream—the one I never shared—leaving a note which read, *Love you. Bye. Look after Dad.*

Prisoners of circumstance, yes; and Wilson even more so, physically and mentally bound to his tiny concrete cell



of a flat. I think he may even have spent some time inside, but I'm not sure. I visited him every three or four days, making sure he was alright, buying his food once a week. Every time I saw him it seemed he had faded a little more into the pattern of that room. That drab collection of featureless clutter. His life's possessions, all unremarkable individually, just an old person's *things* but together constituting a mosaic which had absorbed him. As if the pieces had subtly shifted around him over the years to make a place for him in the picture.

The seeds were expensive, costing nearly as much money as Wilson had given me. I carried them back home in a paper bag. He took the bag from me, carefully, almost reverentially, and set it down on the sideboard beside the cage. I hung back at the door. From there the canary inside seemed completely motionless and I was not sure it was still alive. He tipped the bag out onto the sideboard and began to sift through the pile of seeds.

"The man said it's Mixed, I'm sorry. They didn't have just canary seed."

"Doesn't matter. There's bound to be some canary in amongst it. Ah." He had found what he was looking for. Wilson held several large oval-shaped seeds up to show me and then opened the door of the cage. Buster proved he was still with us by lifting his head a little to meet Wilson's hand. Then quickly, and so roughly I thought he must break its neck, he forced open the bird's beak and jammed one of the seeds right down its gullet. The little eyes bulged as it choked the obstruction down and the bird collapsed again to the floor of the cage.

Wilson turned round, wiping his hands on his trousers and smiling broadly. Then he began to usher me out, saying, "He's all right now. Come back tomorrow and you'll see him. He's all right."

It was a most beautiful thing. In this half lit room its feathers shone gold with a brilliance that bordered on luminosity as it flitted and darted around our heads. I couldn't help but laugh to see it, and to listen to the joyful music of its song. Wilson was chuckling quietly to himself and the happiness in his face gave me as much of a buzz as the miraculous bird itself.

And then I saw what lay on the floor of the cage. The joy drained out of me and I swear I almost threw up. I have said that I didn't think he was a cruel man, but even if he did not understand that birds must be fed more than the occasional biscuit crumb, what else can you call his treatment of that poor bird. I gently lifted the wrecked carcass out of the cage and wrapped it in newspaper. The old man's attention remained fixed on the other bird which was singing away cheerfully on the top of the dresser. Buster. Sick joke, and it wasn't even intentional.

"How long will this one last, Wilson?" I said bitterly.

Again I was treated to that look of agonised patience.

"His life, my life. What's the difference? It's just a question of scale," he said.

I departed quickly, leaving sour words behind me.

But he was dying. We both knew it, and as much as I despised him, I could not leave him on his own at the end. The time came when there were no more canaries, and I refused to buy more of the seed. He tried other birds but he only found joy in canaries, and he faded quickly after that.

Near the end, he persuaded me to help him bake his cake. It turned out flat and solid, and we sweetened it with icing sugar and jam.

He said, "Let's have a picnic."

"Where?" I replied. "You're too weak to go anywhere nice."

"On the roof."

I filled a thermos with tea, and packed it in a carrier bag along with plates, cups, a knife, and our cake. I found one striped deckchair and a travelling rug, and carted them up five flights to the roof. After setting everything out near the west facing edge, I returned for Wilson.

"Are you a religious man, Jericho?"

I told him I wasn't.

He said, "I always wanted to believe in reincarnation, but I've never had faith. Not true faith, without question. I don't think many people have that any more. I want to believe that your soul goes somewhere else, but what if it just stays with the body? What if you just keep on going the way you were when you were alive?"

He died with a view across the city. It's all a question of scale. The birds came not long after. Slick newborn flopping onto the rug around his rent body. The wind soon dried them. I sat and watched them, until dusk fell and it got cold. I could feel the currents of the skies pass around me, through me. The air was full of birds. I thought about what he said. And waited. Picking the seeds out of my teeth.

Neil Williamson is 25, with a degree in electronic engineering, living and working in Glasgow. He also appeared in TTA2 with the very highly regarded story Softly Under Glass.

Alan Casey is a 26 year-old newcomer to the literary world, having started writing stories just over a year ago. He has had short stories and artwork accepted for publication in England, Ireland, Belgium, America, Australia and Japan.

HELL ON EARTH STREET

DAVID LOGAN

Saturday was almost dead. I crushed the last supermarket beer can, tossed it at the magazine rack still sober, and resolved to buy proper beer in future. Weak, cheap beer is a waste of money. It doesn't do the job.

The fire was out and the coal bunker empty. I boiled a kettle of water and switched on the electric grill to thaw my bones. I hadn't eaten since the half packet of fig rolls that my body ejected hours ago. I would have made toast but there was no bread that didn't have a turquoise beard. I made coffee, but threw it down the sink. The water was off again, rust in the pipes or something; how should I know? My last cigarette was a cold and crinkled filter. There was a horror movie on television but I wanted to put my foot through it.

I should have married a nice girl who would keep me on the straight and narrow. You find them in churches. Church girls are easy, even if they do walk around with pokers up their backs. Trouble is, I was never one for religion. It wouldn't have cost much to lie through my teeth. Nothing gets a church girl on her back faster than a converted sinner—especially if he's a 'bad boy'. My mother always told me someday I'd meet a nice girl and settle down. Thirty-four wasn't past it; I still had time. I often dreamed of church girls. Someday I'd get saved.

I never knew my father because he died before I was born — how's that for kicking shit in a pregnant woman's face? My mother lived on state hand-

outs and gifts from various lovers. She never married again because, she said, no one could take John's place. Well, if that was true, I'd like to know what they were doing in the big bedroom while I was trying to sleep a paper-thin wall away. I know what she meant. She was a romantic. I am too. I like the dark, freshness of night, and the solitude. That's why I didn't go to bed that night.

The final dregs of Saturday were colder outdoors and the wee hours of Sunday would be colder still. It was April and last night there was snow. There were no signs of Global Warming around here, but I could believe in Global Freezing. I kept a sleeping bag under the sheets, but I wore my clothes anyhow. If you touched the radiator in my bedroom your fingers would stick to it like it was a block of ice... That's exaggerating a bit, but you've got to maintain a sense of humour. I tied my laces and put on my heaviest coat. I pulled the door shut and the noise echoed through the ice mote air. My home didn't collapse like a house of cards, though I half expected it to. They'd taken away all the others that used to hold it up. Only 14 Hell On Earth Street stood in the path of redevelopment. I'd resisted well, but knew I couldn't last much longer.

Walking away from my home seemed pointless; there was nowhere to go, and I'd have to return through the same flatland of broken bricks and cracked foundations. Every fourth streetlight was on — just enough light for the police who prowled when they'd nothing better to

do. Sometimes a car would come here, a back door would open and a body topple out. Then the car would zoom off and the body would lie there until morning when the police got round to answering an anonymous phone call. When I saw car headlights I made myself vanish. If you lie flat they don't see you. Tonight it was unnecessary.

My vague ambition was an all-night petrol station about a half mile outside the flat-land. I could buy cigarettes there, and chocolate to sustain me until daylight, when someone in the city-centre might be charitable towards a beggar. I didn't like myself, but I was the only me I had.

I usually go south to work, but tonight I'd wandered north. It might have been east or west, but I called it north because it was almost imperceptibly uphill. Half of Roden Street remained, ten or fifteen terraced houses on the boundary of the flat-land. They would be next to go. Their former occupants had been promised a pay-off. Some were rehoused elsewhere, others were living in rural caravans waiting for the redevelopment of Roden Street, promised small gardens front and rear. Most of these people would never see seventy again and the developers had financial problems created by government underfunding. Since building would begin, if it ever began, at the south end, I reckoned the new Roden Street was half a decade away at the earliest. Some houses were boarded, none had glass. As I wandered by I heard noises from within. Probably rats, or kids, or people worse off than me.

I bought a box of matches, a carton of milk and a loaf with my chocolate and cigarettes. The man in the petrol station, who gave me four pound coins change from a fiver, didn't look at my face. Maybe he knew me. I said, "Thank you," and he nodded. There was no point buying firefighters. I'd have to use

the cooker while I saved for coal. Last quarter's electric bill hadn't been paid. What was the point in paying since they were bound to turn the electric off soon to drive me out? Outside the petrol station the morning felt warmer, but I knew it was just a sad kind of gladness. A goody bag and still four shiny quid left over! Closer to the flat-land the lights were fewer. I stopped in the darkest of streets and lit a cigarette – and was still sucking it by my return to Roden Street.

She was standing on the footpath with her arms folded like she was waiting for a taxi. My first thought was that she must be cold in that biker's leather jacket and short skirt – even though she was wearing dark tights. But schoolgirls wear short skirts and no tights at all. I've always been in awe of their tolerance of cold weather. I couldn't walk past without speaking—not that I wanted to. "Hi." It came easier to me than 'hello' but still sounded synthetic. I stopped beside her and awaited a reply. Her hair looked clean, tied back from an attractive, if gaunt, face, like a horse's tail.

"Hi," she said, and I offered her a cigarette, which she accepted.

"Are you waiting for somebody?"

"No," she said, voice like a shadow. "I just came out to look at the moon."

Her eyesight must have been better than average; there was no moon tonight. "You're sleeping in there?" I thumbed at the open door of the house we stood outside. Someone coughed. She didn't answer. "Look, I live there." I pointed at the dim shape of my home across the flat-land and far away. "It'll be a hell of a lot warmer. I'll make you coffee."

"How much?" She looked at me without smiling.

I wasn't expecting her to say that. I almost said 'a large mug'. Thank God I didn't.



My intentions weren't strictly honourable but... Hell, what did I expect? "I don't have much money," I stuttered. "I can pay you with warmth and comfort... I've got a bar of chocolate!"

She held out her hand. I fished in the plastic carrier and, reluctantly, handed over my Cadbury's Dairy Milk. She asked me my name.

"Patrick Swayze. What's yours?"

"Julia Roberts."

That was funny — but she didn't cheer up as we crossed the flat-land, just smoked her cigarette and wandered along like daylight would never arrive.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked, considering offering my coat. If I had it certainly wouldn't have been an act of chivalry, more like desperation to be appreciated by this girl. I was more lonely than I realised. I decided to call her Julie. She shook her head and I kept my coat.

I waved an arm and said, "They've ruined every single home. Destroyed them all." She looked sideways at me. "I mean homes, not just houses. It used to be a community when I was...when I was a kid." I nearly said 'when I was your age'.

She understood with a flick of her head and took another draw. She made me feel stupid, as though I expected something *else*, like happiness, when all I had a right to expect was misery. I didn't have much experience with girls. It must have showed like blood on ice-cream. I decided to shut up. I hadn't touched her yet, and I wanted badly to touch her, inside her tights, but I was afraid of her too.

I brought her through to the kitchen, my mood mellowed by her serenity, and boiled a kettle of rusty water. "I've no butter or jam. Sorry." I put a slice of dry bread on a plate and set it on the table before her; just one slice, I'd already lost a bar of chocolate. I put the rest of the loaf in the bread-bin after

throwing the moulded slices out. I wasn't hungry. I ate so poorly these days my stomach filled easily, cigarette smoke was enough. It must have shrunk to nothing. I poured coffee and sat facing her. "Do you live around here?"

"No," was all she said, in an unsure way. She wasn't eating her bread, and appeared not to have noticed the coffee.

"Your friends, back in Roden Street," I ventured, not knowing what I was going to ask, "do they...don't they have somewhere better to go?"

She shrugged.

I said, tentatively, "We'll warm up quickly in bed."

"Will you scratch my back? I used to love getting my back scratched."

I'd not heard anything so welcome in a long time. "Front too if you want."

She smiled. It was like a sudden crack on the surface of an ice covered lake. I wasn't at all sure I liked it. Her teeth were grey and wet.

When she undressed my bedroom grew colder. I'd opened out the sleeping bag, so that it was like a quilt, and I told her to get in quickly before she froze to death. She said she wasn't cold, and I found it hard to believe even though she didn't have goose-bumps; but she was the colour of dish water, even her nipples. There she stood, naked and curvaceous and willing and ready. And there I stood, fully clothed and flaccid and knowing that something was very wrong. I didn't want to touch her now. Julie said, "You can't live here forever. You'll have to move out. Everything changes."

I admitted, "I know." It was the first time I'd admitted it to anyone, even myself. I shivered and removed my clothes, trembling. Julie pulled down the sheets and lay on her stomach. I knelt astride her legs and pulled the sheets up again, over my shoulders. I scratched her back, but only for half a minute, then I lay on her for warmth. There was no warmth

in her. I knew she must be ill—exposure, or whatever. Maybe she used hard drugs. I didn't know anything about that, but I was sure she needed to see a doctor; she should get back to her parents with whom she might recover... What a hypocrite I was, a mass of contradictions, thinking like a father while wishing my masculinity was firm enough to indicate lust. I was pathetic, laughable. I apologised—a whisper in an ear. Julie squirmed around beneath me and a hand began working. The shivery touch of it almost made me ejaculate, erection or not. I said, "What's your real name?"

Julie shrugged and licked my lips with a tongue like a giant slug that's been held under the cold tap. I gave her a reciprocal lick and my right hand remembered what to do.

Making love to her was like being in a dream, or stupor, a haze of church cemetery flowers on newly dug earth. I knew she was dead. Her passionless face was pained trying to remember the physical sensations and psychic emotions of our act. She could not; all the living things were mine; too many for my easily intoxicated senses — and maybe I was experiencing a fragment of what it's like to be dead; the nothingness of body and bewilderment of mind; permanent, inescapable confusion. The act ended like a lazy feather landing on cotton wool. Yet it wasn't an anti-climax. It was all in my head, very different, softer, than a bodily experience. Knowing what I knew, nevertheless, I asked her to stay until morning. She said she had to get back, and I said I would walk with her.

The outside night was as we'd left it. I asked, "Will you visit me again?"

"No," she replied, sadly, but without hesitation.

She had given me a gift. As I passed through the flat-land I detected what I hadn't been able to before. It was just a

small gift of ghosts. The abundant life that was here, and now was gone, had left its imprint; the smell of washing day, noise of children in the streets, visions of young mothers pushing prams and stopping to chat. Julie's gift wafted through me, warmed me, then evaporated and I shivered. Soon they would tear down number 14. Would I be a ghost too?

I touched her elbow a short distance from her house on Roden Street. "I'll leave you here," I said, not wanting to. "I wish I could give you more."

"It's not your fault," she said. "Come and meet the others." She indicated her house with a slight jerk of her head. I felt privileged and terrified at once. "Come on," she said, and I had the option of following her or not. What did I have to lose? The sounds of 'the others' increased, perhaps in anticipation of my arrival. The door was open and I went in on Julie's heels. Into the blackness where there was nothing but mumbling. Then shapes came from the darkness which I identified as people, barely people; wretched and ragged they ushered me into a room. They lined the walls, their bones protruding through their skin, wiping stick fingers in empty bowls and trying to taste their fingers, mouths chewing though there was nothing there, no tongues. I thought, ludicrously, 'Julie must be fresh'. On the stairs some pitiful wretches cut themselves with glass and long fingernails. Black gaps parted their flesh, but there was no blood, and worse, no pain. I looked to the landing, and down to the hall, for Julie, but I'd lost her. Some of these fetid corpses, little more than skeletons, were copulating, bone scraping on bone. Some didn't notice me, others did, and touched me lightly, afraid, in awe. From the backs of their throats came moans of dismay. I was not afraid. How I wished I was Jesus and could restore the dead to life. "Who are

you?" I asked collectively. They moaned louder and turned away. In a minute, or an hour, they lost interest in me and resumed their impossible plight for physical sensation. I stepped through and over them. Julie had gone.

I left the house on Roden Street, empty, drained of want or need, and crossed the flat-land towards number 14.

When I raised my eyes from the cracked concrete I saw that my home was no longer there. The dust had stopped swirling. I wasn't surprised.

I wondered where I should go.

David Logan lives with his wife and son in Northern Ireland, where he edits and publishes Grotesque magazine. A prolific author of horror stories (and a western), he appears in numerous publications both here and abroad.

BRIAN MAYCOCK & THE LATEST THINGS

Fashion called
for slight mutations,
and the people obliged.

There were
radiation induced
growths
for the elite.

The mass market adopted
third world diseases
and the effects of
seasonal chemical leakages.

While
the less fashionable
settled
for inhaling traffic fumes
and coughing
up lung sections
in crowded rooms.

All done
purely,
you understand,
as personal statements.

SLENDER LOIS SLOW DORIS

ANDREW HOOK

It is seven o'clock in the evening, and although not yet dark, Lois steps out of her bedroom. Her steps are cautious, petite, and she is wearing a long black dress that reaches down to her calves, as though to simulate night's touch. It hugs her, it hides her, and is practical for her needs.

The living room curtains are still drawn, damn the sun. During the summer months her wide eyes flinch when turned to the light, and even an evening's glow can be too much, but she can't wait for the darkness to go to her class.

The door to her apartment is permanently locked. The key to the door shadows its shape amongst dust on the sideboard. Apart from Doris, no one else has been in this place for a very long time. Like a window, a full length mirror is attached by hooks to the back of the door, and Lois stands before it. Her short, mousy hair is easy to comb, and sits in place nicely on top of her head. She checks her reflection and admires herself slowly.

Into a bag she places an apple and two bananas, in case she becomes hungry along the way. The bag is canvas, and closes with a drawstring that prevents accident. To halt the bag from dropping, the excess string is wrapped tightly around her fingers and opposing thumb. It will indent her flesh, but she accepts it as necessary in order to be safe.

As it is summer she has switched to a later class, but the sky is still light and

melts through the thick curtains giving a beyond sunset glow to the room. The room itself is small, with everything within reach from the elegant sofa which is covered in depth with soft scatter-cushions. Books fill one side of the bookcase, while Indian figurines fill the other; they are cast-offs from earlier days. There is no video recorder in this room, but there is a black and white television. Lois does not restrict her viewing to old movies, but simply prefers it that way.

With the long skinny arm that is not holding the bag, she glances at her watch; then moves to the curtains.

It is time. She tuts to herself as the light hits her eyes, and then she reaches over to the bookcase to pick up her shades. They are large and impenetrable to stares from the outside. She has adapted them with an elastic band so that they fit close to her head without falling off. She knows what she is doing, and is small enough to get away with it unnoticed.

Now she opens the window, and steps out onto the branch of the oak tree that touches the wall of her carefully chosen apartment. In the autumn and winter it is the darkness that conceals her among bare, creaking limbs. In the opposing seasons it is the foliage. Quiet and sure, from tree to tree, she now begins the journey that will encompass two avenues and a park. The park, it must be said, is not really necessary, but it's a much better location for delicious birds eggs.

Andy has arrived early at the college, and sits in his car at the car park, watching the entrance. For two weeks now she has enthralled him. He does not know exactly what it is about her, but apart from the other girls at coffee time she alone has that something. Unsure how to act, to start conversation, Andy has simply watched her without being obvious.

He has noted so far that she does not buy coffee, but drinks from a container that is kept in a drawstring bag. Her movements are slow, yet appear calculated, with a definable precision. She does not talk much, and he never sees her enter or leave the building. For two evenings a week, at fifteen minutes a time, his eyes have flicked across to hers as she stands in half-darkness. Flashes of pupil reflection disconcert him, without being really sure if she knows of him. This is why he sits in the car park: to coincide, to walk, to start conversation, as though it had never been planned.

Yet it is nearly eight o'clock and he still hasn't seen her. He picks up his textbooks, drops one and retrieves it, and then gets out of his car to walk to his class. He is probably thinking that she hasn't come, but on the other side of the building, removing black slip-on shoes, which she has cleverly adapted, out of her drawstring bag, Lois glances about herself; seen or not seen? Her shoes fit her feet, she opens the fire door, and makes her way to the flower-arranging class.

Lois has looked before, and within the college she cannot find one single mirror to check her appearance. The toilets are a danger-zone she won't dare to enter, the amalgamation of scents is too much. It is her hands she must trust to pull leaves from her hair, and her eyesight she must trust to locate lichen smears on her dress. Lois places a lot of her life in the trust of nature not to give

her away. But they are kind to each other, so no harm is done, and she feels confident upon entering her class.

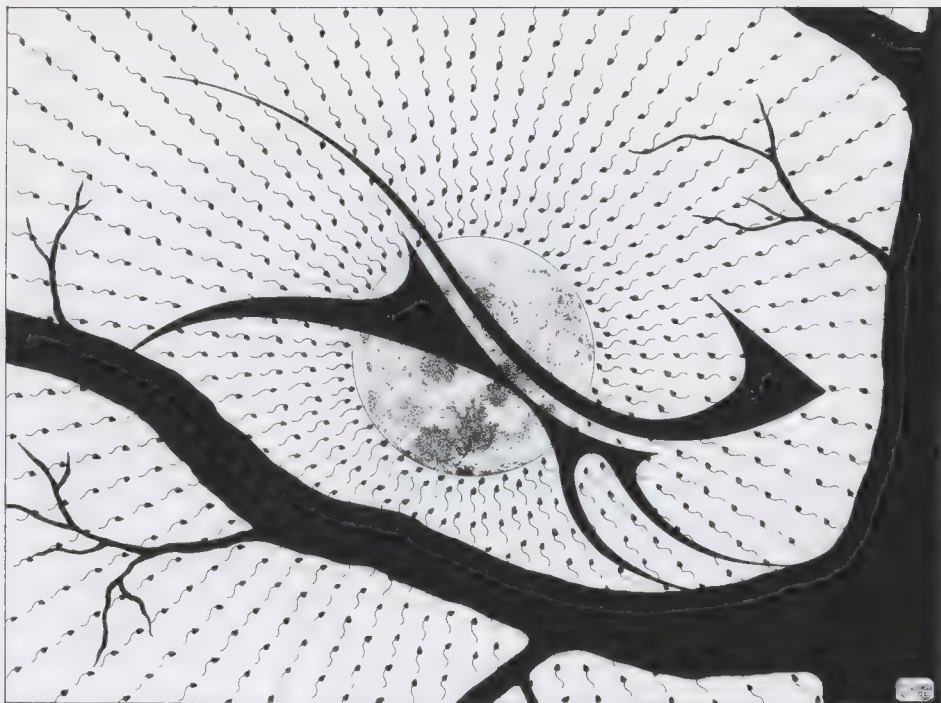
Tonight they are taught about wild flowers, primarily. The teacher, perversely, has cultivated some in her very own back garden, and has brought them in for this task. Lois is pleased. She enjoys the colours presented by this wild bunch, but has to resist nibbling at the leaves. Her large thin ears take in all the information; on colour, on size, on scent, on not being politically incorrect; whilst the back of her mind works over and over the strange theme of love.

For two weeks now she has seen him, scouting oblique glances, whilst attempting the deception of facing away. Initially terrified, she has grown to care for him; the attention that he pays her seems so different from those others, whom, we must admit, she never really knew. Despite the Indian origin deep in her ancestry, she has never been within an all encompassing family. Her genus avoids contact. Shy and solitary, or living in pairs, the question of mating has always been difficult for them. She has often used Doris as an excuse to shun sex.

Now a fly has appeared in the room, perhaps through the window over the door, and Lois' eyes twist and turn with its motion. Taking a detour it crosses the class, circling some flowers upright in a vase, before settling out of reach on the badly painted wall. Its tongue on its legs, it now watches Lois, and contemplates the nature of her very existence.

The teacher is talking some kind of language, but Lois is fixed to that fly on the wall. She has an awareness that pin-points her gaze to the reciprocal gaze of the insect.

During the break Andy buys coffee. It's black for him, and twenty-five pence a cup. He wants to buy two but knows she won't drink it, so decides to forfeit that line of pick-up. Slender Lois



is in the dark corner. She finds that she has little to discuss about shopping or soaps, but is intent on overhearing anything about children. Her bones ache for something heavy to haul about within that black dress. But the talk was kept quiet from her, and she concentrated instead on keeping her grip on the drawstring bag. Inside there were eggs, they were precious and fragile, it is important for food to keep it intact.

The room has a hubbub, an onomatopoeic word, and one that Lois finds difficult to spell. She has yet to get to grips with that kind of language. If she concentrates, she finds that she can hear nothing at all, and can believe in fact that the room is quite quiet, apart from a noise in the air conditioning. If that were true then Andy would be alone with her, but instead there are people between them that make both of them rather shy and cautious. Well, one is shy, and Andy is cautious. He is yet to be

sure if she really knows of him. He feels that with this one he must take his time. It is her head that intrigues him, in the moments that he glimpses it. The eyes like black-marbled marbles, set in concave compartments of face. Her nose, ridged with purpose, and her ears, seem to be designed for something other than man. And perhaps because of this, he senses her vulnerability, and how easy she will be once he has painstakingly dissected it.

There are two minutes left. He is aware of the time. He sees her head turn surreptitiously, an almost indefinable movement towards the wall to her right, and seizing the moment with equalled stealth, he reaches the side of her before she turns back.

During the latter part of the night class the fly was forgotten. The flowers were mismatched within her given vase. Lois' mind was beckoned to

Andy, feeling that her biological clock was on time. Without a moment to spare she had accepted the lift, well aware of the complications that would no doubt arise. She had been surprised at her calm, yet her blood was now buzzing like harmonicas at a buskers convention.

Now she knew he had black hair and a lean, handsome face, with an expression of interest. And he had touched her on the arm ever so gently, but in a way that she could still feel it now. He had asked for her star-sign, and the random choice of Cancer had pinpointed her birthday for the following Thursday. He said he was studying astrology as opposed to astronomy, although she wasn't aware of a difference; just that the stars seemed far away and inconsequential to her state of being, which owed more to Earth's nature than to galaxies of light.

She was, he had said, a typical Cancer. Coy and demure, slender and attractive. She would, he had said, have an interesting month, the planets were conspiring, on her behalf, to bring about a great joy. Things were changing for the better, he had said, with a smile.

After class she feels open on the walk to his car. The front entrance of the college looks out onto paving, there is no undergrowth to make her comfortable here. Still, Andy's hand is at her elbow, the bone almost in his grasp, as he contemplates that she resembles Naomi Campbell, or one other of those skinny bints. Do her thighs have flesh, he wonders, as she swings her legs into the car.

With a quick movement he throws his books into darkness, and laughing he starts up the engine. She has given him her address, and he knows the way. He assures her they will be home in five minutes. Lois stares at the road, the rushing blackness so close underfoot. The car smells of ash, in unclean, and some plastic coke bottles push at her feet, along with Andy's apologies, but

she is too scared to kick them away. There is a pounding in her ears, and her head whirls like the tyres, not hearing the conversation, feeling so distanced from nature, from outside of here. After two minutes she has to tell him to stop.

Lois darts from the car to behind the nearest tree. She makes noises with her mouth to fake sickness, while she sniffs at the tree before squatting to pee, splashing the urine against the tough trunk, until she is reassured by the demarcation of territory, and the knowledge they are on the route home.

After another two minutes she returns to the car, and makes reasoned excuses for her troublesome stomach. It is not long later that they are outside her apartment, and it will be easier, she tells him, if he parks round the corner; that is, if he decides to come up.

He smiles a reply that unnerves her confidence, while he asks her if she lives alone.

"I have a close relative with me," is the answer she gives.

While he parks round the back she scales the oak tree, and reenters her home through the left open window.

He has noted so far that she is terrified of cars, for she had held on tight to that drawstring bag. Her movements are slow, except under danger, and then she scampers quickly to safety. She does not like colour, or rather sharp colours, and later he finds that the light in her fridge does not work. Parking his car, he attaches the Krooklock, then walks round to her apartment, careful not to rush curiosity.

It is ten o'clock in the night, and leaving Andy at the doorstep, Lois steps into the bedroom. She then proceeds to get Doris up. This takes some time as Doris is sluggish, and she has well-rounded child-bearing hips. Her eyes blink in the starlight augmented by street lamp. She is told of the problem, of the uncertainty of love, and inexor-

ably she unlocks the door and descends the stairs of the communal hallway.

Andy is looking through the letter-box, but the apartment is so dark that he sees nothing until Doris reaches the light thrown in by that very letter-box. This is the moment that surprises him. He had not been expecting this. Perhaps it is because the light is poor, but Lois' relative appears in slow motion. Like watching the hour-hand of a clock, he cannot see how she is moving except in relation to where she has been. When she opens the door she grows him a smile, familiar due to family resemblance. Her voice is quiet, lethargic, with a hint of an accent.

"Lois is tired, she is sick from the drive. I am sure she will see you next week."

Andy nods in agreement and returns to his car, resisting the temptation to look back through the letter-box. He starts up the engine and drives to his house, where he examines his textbooks under a strong spotlight lamp.

For Lois' pseudo-birthday she wears that long black dress again, the one that reaches down to her calves. Since last week she has been outside just once. A slight furtive look at the shapes of the stars from a hollow she has found in a nearby oak tree. She wonders about their significance and feels a stirring inside her, that signals she is ready for yet one more try.

Now her hands flatten down a ruck in her dress, and she wonders again if she'll ever get that bulge. The feeling is stronger now, her head is less clear. Usually she stays inside whilst she is in season, pining for something she doesn't dare to have. But tonight she will shun danger because Andy is nice. And she knows that to achieve the marvellous you must strive for the unattainable.

To settle the butterflies she has cooked some rice soup. She makes it soft,

thick, and glutinous; before eating it cold with some insects and leaves. Breaking an egg she swallows it whole, and thinks of the baby that she wants deep inside her, drawing its energy from her very self.

Then she moves into the bedroom, tidies it up. Doris is flat out on the bed, and Lois takes her plump body and her thick red hair, and stows her away in the airing cupboard. Perhaps she will stay there until Andy leaves, Lois hopes she will not ask her out. That slow form should remain there until after her pregnancy, no longer a harness for her sexual repression. But then Doris is her failsafe, and Doris is her best friend.

Leaving the bedroom she makes for the mirror, and turns her reflection around for her gaze. She smiles a broad smile, which startles her somewhat, so she quickly gathers her things into a drawstring bag. The key to the door is already inside. It avoids suspicion to enter that way, and obliterates the chance for a change of mind.

Opening the window she steps onto the tree, and makes her way slowly across to the college. The wind which moves around her makes more noise than she, and this is a breezeless night. Over the park she panics as some boys climb some trees, and it is a moment before Lois extends her arms again in order to continue her journey. For reassurance she sniffs the bark about her, for the next few trees in the line. She has seen what children can do to an animal, and she doesn't want to see it again.

Tonight will be the night for me, she thinks. Out of shyness and with a hint of teased courtship, Lois had missed her Tuesday night class. A simple, deliberate action, which she knew would invoke in the right man feelings of anxiety and concern, accentuate longing, and affix sympathy with desired vulnerability to her mate. A mental dance to incite his affection.

During the first half of her flower arranging class, Lois is so wound up that she chews on some of the tulips, nearly spitting them out they are so sickly sweet, which does not go unnoticed by some of her surprised fellow students.

Andy is also listening inattentively to his teacher. He has plans for a paper that will spearhead his proposals for an eventual university degree. He has noted that Lois is present today, he stood in the shadows when she came down from the tree, and watched as she groped for her shoes in that old drawstring bag.

At coffee break they talk, but the talk is one-sided. Lois doesn't see the need to tell him her life, but he persists on telling her future. Like how the moon is perfect for her, and how it fits into her eyes. While they talk she remains in the corner, aware that other people are looking to them and then looking back. Most of all she wonders what they think about Andy, for she is well aware that her beauty is different.

She sips through a straw that is connected to a water bottle that came from her drawstring bag. The sips are short and in bursts. There is a tingling sensation emanating from her loins and she is aware she is desperate to mate.

Andy is not aware she is ovulating. Although his eyes appear fixed to hers, and his mouth runs through its oiled spiel, he is much more interested in the short brown hairs that are present at the base of her neck. About one millimetre in length, their growth does not taper, and they disappear uniformly down the back of that dress.

Lois can almost feel the path of the egg travelling down her left fallopian tube. She is determined not to bottle out, or rather, she no longer has a choice in the matter. The machinations of nature have determined her state of mind. She will mate and conceive for that is

the way of life. Doris will not be needed tonight.

Before they go back to their classes, Andy presents her with a birthday card that depicts a pair of prosimians. Lois takes it tentatively and is silent some time.

"What are you thinking?" he eventually asks her.

"That I'd like to be both animals at the same time."

"It seems to me that you want the impossible."

Lois says, "I *am* the impossible."

Once they are in the car Andy looks to her side. He throws the textbooks onto the back seat, and before Lois can recognise them, he has already driven out of her territory and around the outer ring road three times. Lois gets giddy, and reaches out for the dashboard that is bobbing before her like a teasing cat's toy. The streetlights invade her without her dark glasses, and her body tenses up against the restraint of the seat-belt, whilst Andy with one hand pulls open her bag, and effectively removes the key to her flat.

Lois has gone now. She's right out of here. Her head is away pressed outside of the glass, and her legs are somewhere up around the sides of her body. Her arms are flailing whilst they remain still. Her eyes are rolling in on herself, and her baby urges are joined with a terror that grinds her small lukewarm body into the base of the seat. Now she is carried upside-down to the door of her apartment. Now she is carried upstairs to her rooms. She is easy to carry and her eyes no longer shine but glisten, and each step is wet with her urine. And her appendages grasp him in a prehensile grip.

Andy's arms are strong, he quickly makes for her bedroom before she has time to come round, and ties her arms swiftly to the head of the bed. While

Lois remains jolted, Andy searches for Doris and finds the red wig and padded bodysuit warmed in the cupboard. Her failsafe, a contraceptive device, her close relative, is examined and then put to one side. Slow Doris, Lois is yet to be thinking. Too slow for Doris, far too slow.

Andy locks the exits, stays calm, lights a cigarette. He then cuts off her clothes and strokes her brown haired body, before getting out his notebook and uncapping his pen.

Outside it is raining, a sultry summer storm. There is thunder and lightning; her trees are all wet. Water drops from the branches and onto the grass. The soil becomes saturated and channels rivulets through the grass blades, that descend down a slope to fill dips in a pavement. The puddles get bigger, they merge and conceal, they dance the moon and shatter windows from lighted apartments, while Lois twists and turns under the knife of an animal; an animal who is human but not necessarily humane.

Andrew Hook was born in 1967 and lives in Norwich. He has appeared in *Iron* and *The Science of Sadness*, and a few other places worth seeking out. He has been described as a hobbit in large trousers, and spends much of the twilight hours reading fairy tales to his wife, Ya.

Brian Maycock (see the poem *The Latest Things* on page 12) is originally from Lancashire but now lives in exile in West Yorkshire. His work has been published/accepted by a number of UK and US small press zines including *Flickers 'n' Frames*, *Alternaties*, *Paladin*, *Journal 500*, *Stuff* and *The Cosmic Unicorn*.

Albert Russo lives in Paris, where he writes poetry, novels and short stories in both English and French, his work appearing all over the world. His story *The Vindictive Studio* appeared in *TTA3*.

THE PERUVIAN GODDESS

by

ALBERT RUSSO

when he replays the cassette
and hears his own voice
he winces
feeling the blood rush to his temple
slightly high-pitched
a bit tremulous
with a touch of hysteria
it's not what others would think
rather the way he perceives himself
it's not either that he wishes
he were someone else
no, it is at once simple
and terribly ambitious
like the swish of grassblades
in a simmering July afternoon
where he can't tell whether
it is a sound at all
or the foreshadowing of danger
the senses are so exacerbated
and suddenly, to his delight
he reenacts a scene
that took place decades ago
bending over his parents' gramophone
a little boy sits mesmerized
the voice coming out
of the scratched 78 rpm record
is that of Yma Sumac
if there is a creator
then she must be a goddess
with her notes scaling the rainbow
from the whispers of genesis
to the explosions of the heart
he can't put a face to this voice
in spite of the cover photograph
even consciously blurs its features
the jungle spills out of those grooves
drawing him into its magic
and the scratch seems to be
that which binds him to the miracle
so frail and yet so timeless

THE BEEKEEPERS

ALAN CASEY

Though bees had nestled in the hollow of her throat harmonising with a buried pulse, and wasps had walked her picnic chin harvesting dribbled jam, Amber Rose had never been stung.

Such good fortune begs breaking.

Out jogging in a city park she passed a blind man with golden locks and muscles of steel in whose hand a cat's skull rested. Looking back she saw him crush the bones to dust and deliver it to the wind. From the midst of this powder cloud a humming could be heard.

Progressing a short distance a barking dog crossed her path and broke her stride. To her surprise she killed it with a curse. Kneeling, a guide harness filled her hand as she shook the lifeless creature, regretting its hasty decease. Concerned by the prospect of vengeful owners she got to her feet and scanned the park, spying only the blind man calling in vain. His approach, hesitant strides carrying him ever closer to the dog's body, set her tiptoeing away.

He found the dog and let slip a roar, a swarming scream with insect core. Parting her lips to whisper sorrow Amber Rose tripped and fell, unwittingly permitting a speeding queen bee to enter her mouth. After hitting the back of her throat it tumbled down into an unfed belly. There about her innards it writhed and sang, its struggles mirroring the frenzied spitting Amber Rose employed, clawing at her stomach and windpipe desperate to eject the busy invader.

With a buzz the queen emerged and headed directly for the blind man. Wasting no time Amber Rose sprinted

homeward, unsure which she feared more, the blind man's menagerie or her own murderous words.

Having showered, she returned upstairs to her one room bedsit, there to contemplate events that must surely have been at least partially hallucinogenic in nature, undisclosed side-effects of a draining health regime. Clinging to this notion she promptly binned her diet book and exercise video, resolving to return her fashionably emaciated body to its once zestfully voluptuous dimensions.

As she rifled her purse in search of payment, the pizza delivery boy peered over her shoulder, hoping to catch sight of the others who'd be partaking of the family sized pizza he balanced on one arm. She was alone. Smiling courteously he took her money and handed her the box, filing her evasive countenance away in his memory under the heading 'eating disorders'.

In socks and underwear she sat before the TV devouring her treat. Unexpectedly the electricity meter ran out, plunging her room into twilight shadow. Realising she'd given her last coins to the delivery boy Amber Rose relaxed, accepting the mellow darkness as a fortuitous milestone on her return to sensuous normality.

Strangely, the TV continued hissing despite its lack of power. Staring at the blank screen she discovered it was not a hiss but a hum. There were bees in the room with her, and yet more were entering through the half open window.

She rose and edged towards the window but stopped short, confronted by a buzzing confusion of aggressive insects intent,



it would seem, on attacking her. Defiantly holding her ground, arms waving before her, Amber Rose almost missed the queen's entrance. Unafraid of the woman's swatting palms the queen dodged back and forth in close proximity to her face. It didn't take her long to realise it was the blind man's bee and that it wanted in again.

Horried, she retreated, mouth clamped shut against accidental intrusion. She was soon backed against a wall with nowhere else to go but through the cloud of bees, a terrifying prospect. As she moved forward she was stung on the lip causing her to scream, during which time the queen and a number of other bees entered her gullet. She spat repeatedly, ridding her tongue of those insects unfortunate enough to have been crushed between her teeth. Moments later she was stung again, several times around the face, with the result that the muscles powering her jaw locked open.

Aware of the seething bees now within her, Amber Rose tried to scream but found her voice similarly paralysed. Before she could reach the refrigerator, intending to drown the army of occupation in cheap wine, her very mind underwent a disturbing possession. Pausing, she glanced at the floor where those bees who had stung her lay dead. Tears formed as she considered their sacrifice. How in delivering their stings the barbed weapons became lodged in the flesh of the enemy, so that in freeing themselves the stings were torn from their bodies along with a length of intestine. An honourable if bloody suicide. Surely the samurai would applaud the noble bee. Body and sword indivisible, a zen synthesis.

This altered perception acknowledged the bees' commotion within her body as pleasure rather than pain. A pleasure she had known before, when on holiday as a child she'd moved through Mediterranean sunlight touching the ghosts of women whose extinction drew a veil across the

Golden Age. Laying fingers to her shifting stomach she wondered was this what pregnancy felt like, the delicate convulsions of a pleasurable parasite?

For a day she remained isolated in her bedsit, untroubled by hunger, thirst or weariness. It appeared the colony busily reworking her innards somehow sustained her basic needs, nourishing her gaunt form. During this period all her hair fell out, granting Amber Rose a sort of embryonic innocence. It was while examining the seamless robe her flesh had become that she first noticed the geometrical patterning taking shape just above her bald pubis. At first no amount of hip-shifting could highlight the ridges she felt developing beneath her skin, but within two hours they were visible, the hexagonal growths forming a supple honeycomb that spread to all portions of her body.

Night came again and with it an urge to abandon the city and follow the lost sun westward towards a rural horizon.

Thus she came to be striding through urban backstreets, her patterned nakedness inconstantly lit by fluorescent lamps. Her bizarre appearance and eerie, open-mouthed stare caused those that set eyes on her to turn aside, muttering comments regarding the senility addiction offers the young.

At one point a man challenged her, but his threats and glinting knife were no match for the anger of the swarm as it gushed from her mouth, expending dozens of lives in an effort to defend their host. After receiving the survivors back into her body Amber Rose stepped across the insensate man, careful not to desecrate the heroes around him.

Through fields and rivers, forest and moor she advanced, experiencing no lessening of vitality. The honeycomb ridges were now profound growths, the cells covered by a seal of translucent skin. Holding her hand against the bright morning sky she saw darkened motion where muscle and bone had previously existed. Caress-

ing her breasts she squeezed gently, expressing a tumbling stream of bees that circled her head before diving back down her throat.

Skirting a tiny village she felt compelled to head south, until confronted by a walled garden. There the bees began to exit her mouth, returning minutes later to dance upon her tongue, communicating in the language of movement all they'd seen. Amber Rose followed their directions and came upon a rusted gate buried beneath a cascade of ivy. Entering the perfumed enclave she moved towards its heart, where a ramshackle summerhouse provided support for climbing flowers. To the right of her stood a manor house, its restrained splendour permitting the moat of flora to engulf great swathes of its exterior in verdant foliage.

Stepping into the summerhouse a change took place in the structure of her flesh. Where before the honeycomb had permitted free movement, it now became restrictive, rendering her movements leaden. Reaching its sun-dappled centre and turning to face the house, Amber Rose could no longer move. Her stillness signalled an eruption of activity among the bees who passed ceaselessly between the flowers and her body.

Days crept by in which she knew a sublime joy. From time to time small groups of women emerged from the manor house to tend the abundant garden, their age as varied as their aspect. Although none seemed shocked by her sudden arrival and strange appearance they nevertheless granted her a period of privacy before individually welcoming her in passing. While some allowed their hands to linger on her body as if seeking to confirm a suspicion or banish unease, others simply stood and stared. One very fat woman, whose beauty made Amber Rose want to stretch out and kiss her, introduced herself and her sisters as *Melissae* before placing a circlet of dandelions and daises upon her head.

Throughout these warm days, tended by the Melissae, she sensed a fullness that caused her to suspect the colony had expanded to fill every inch of her body. Her heartbeat had become the droning chant of the hive, her breathing the unending passage of nectar gatherers to and fro.

At dawn on a day whose name she could only guess at, the women gathered around her, their numbers swollen by a handful of blind men who navigated by birdsong. Among these wounded males she recognised the skull crusher from the park, his long blond hair loose upon his bare chest.

He drew close and ran sensitive fingertips across her body, at the same time sniffing discreetly. "She's ready," he announced, stepping back.

The women took hold of Amber Rose and carried her into a large wood-paneled hall within the manor house, its dark surfaces providing a cool contrast to the sun-bleached trellises of the summerhouse. At its centre was a golden bowl the size of a small pond into which they placed her. After stripping and being washed by the others, two Melissae joined her in the bowl.

The blind man was led inside, and from his belt took two oddly shaped knives which he passed to the women. They then set to work on the honeycomb flesh of their guest, puncturing each hexagonal cell in turn. Soon honey the colour of blood coated her unmoving body and began pooling at the women's feet. Every now and then one would pause in her task and draw a tongue across the vivid sweetness, feasting on the fruits of the bee's labour.

Eventually, when the bowl was more bloodhoney than gold, the blind man was given a spoon of Amber Rose's elixir. In that instant the bees abandoned her body and fled into the garden. With gentle pressure the Melissae bent her limbs until she lay submerged beneath the bloodhoney, a womanly foetus. When she surfaced Amber Rose was once again wholly human, hairless but devoid of patterned growths.

She fed the Melissae from her cupped hands, understanding as each emptied the fateful chalice that she would remain among them always, thirsting as they did for the bloodhoney, the harvest of a thousand wise wombs. □



SAND CASTLES & TOWERS

ROGER STONE

When you look at it from above it seems to float, and you can't see where the people fit. The dark areas seethe with activity, and the street lights only serve to mark out the places that they can't reach. When you raise your eyes to the glass-fronted tower-blocks, all you see is reflections of others, as though each building exists only because of the pressure of others. But when you're high enough the city is quiet, and the silence is more than just the absence of sound, there's a kind of substance to it, you can actually feel it, reach out a hand and touch it, cool, simple and dependable, pure, featureless, and all the anger below is just a series of brush-strokes, adding colour and texture, distorting its simplicity.

Someone jumped from the top of the Pearl Assurance tower one evening last Summer. She lit two fire-brands and stood on the parapet for a long time, leaning forward, her arms held up and back. She seemed to be waiting for a 'right' moment, holding an image in her mind and waiting for things to match up. The wind changed direction after a while, and the glow at the end of the day snapped out and she just leaned out more and gave a little kick at the last moment. Her trajectory cut two yellow lines against the blue evening sky, with just a couple of stars watching her go. Nothing seemed to move, not even the girl. Her trails got longer, her dress fluttered in the passing air, but she never really moved. The horizon just glided up to meet her, and the city lights swal-

lowed the flames, outnumbering them, outshining them, and she disappeared before she reached the ground.

Anwar lay for a long time, that evening, with only his head and arms above the sand. His mother would be worrying about him, pacing the floor and cursing their decisions, and his father would know the value of solitude, and say nothing. His face was cold, now, a stray breeze from the coast carrying the scent of the fish market, but the sand still gave him some of its warmth. Below the surface, he clenched and unclenched his fists, squeezing handfuls of the fine grains, feeling them pass through his fingers. The sky was reaching its peak of blackness. The stars shone hard and unblinking, this far from the oil fields, and he let the pressure of their numbers, the scale of them, throw a blanket of insignificance over him. He lay still and smiled, his body relaxed to that state where the failing temperature could not even cause him to shiver. A low, distant hum tickled his ears and a blinking, orange light crawled across the blackness. Tonight he would not think, he would not anticipate. He would go home late, having given his prayers as the sun went down. If his mother challenged him he would be contrite, and agree to anything to shorten the discussion. He would smile at his father and avoid the gaze of his brothers and sisters. Tonight he would walk home by a route that allowed him to keep his back to the white glow on the horizon.

I found a way to the top of the tower a week or two later. To begin with they had stepped-up the building's security, and I knew it would be a waste of time trying. But eventually they slipped back and I found a door here, a stairwell there, an old service lift. The wind blew south-east, from Bristol, across the channel, hung with seaweed and salt, with a flavour from the brewery. Just below the edge parapet the walls bevelled out slightly and I could see why she'd needed that little kick, that flou-
rish of artistry. I stood on the north-east corner so I could see the way she'd gone, and I opened out my field of vision for a while, pulling back the focus so you don't look at anything in particular but see everything. I could feel the night lights as they watched me, waiting for a second performance. The ones behind me craned their necks for a better look. I knew where she'd gone, although I'd never looked for any signs on the ground, and I leaned out from the corner so I could find the gap in the street lights. The strip of road lay black under the sheen of orange. At first that was all I could see, the black and the orange, but after a while I began to see two points of yellow light, faint but persistent, and they flickered in the waves of passing air, and I knew that she still hadn't reached the ground.

Anwar's father told him it would be too far to walk, and that a taxi would call for him every Saturday morning at eight o'clock, and bring him back every Thursday evening. The taxi was already ordered, although the college was closed for another nine weeks. Such was the power of his mother's voice. His many friends envied him. There would be cinemas and hamburgers, and somebody in his class, somebody who had lived all his life in the city, would know where alcohol could be found. When they said that, they had

looked around guiltily, and he could not be sure they were being serious. Maybe cousin Rashid would know. Maybe cousin Rashid even had alcohol hidden in his house. Anwar would ask him, one night after college, when they sat outside drinking glasses of sweet tea, listening to the crickets.

The night of his father's message about the taxi, Anwar climbed onto the roof of the house after prayers and stood facing the west. The dim glow from the towers of the city burned away the stars near the horizon. One dune stood out against the flare, its wind-sculpted crest leaning, ready to spill over onto the soft-edged white, to extinguish it, to block the road, to fill the college with choking dust. It stood patiently at the edge of the sky and waited while Anwar sat down, and then lay down, and then went to sleep. In the early morning the dune was unchanged, but the signs of the city had faded, for a while.

When the night begins to lose its dominance I find my way home. I keep to insides, where limits and edges can be seen. There's something about darkness that lacks dimension. I don't find that darkness goes on indefinitely, I get no sense of the infinite from darkness. Darkness encloses things, gives them limits. But in the light, you can see forever. Things you can't reach become visible. You possess nothing, because suddenly it all becomes so much bigger than you. In the daytime I listen to chamber music or solo musicians, I read about bedsit land or University crises or cop-shop dramas. I study interior decorating. I eat and sleep. I don't dream.

And when night falls I go out again, shadow-hopping between the pools of street lighting, riding the late-night buses, wandering the empty office blocks. Sometimes I hang around on the edges of the crowds, when they flow be-



tween the pubs or chatter their way from the St David's concert hall to the car park. I climb the stairs of the multi-storey with them, watch them jam their cars into queues on the down-ramps, and I lean over the parapets and watch them drive off. I wait until the last car has gone and all the echoes have bounced around their last corners, and then I run my hand along the edges of the building, reaffirming its shape, feeling it relax.

Anwar had been near to the city once before. His father had taken him to see the national soccer team play at the Al Nasr stadium. If not for the sight of the Dubai Trade Centre, towering thirty stories above the desert, Anwar would have forgotten he was near the city. The noise and the ceremony of the game demanded his full attention. Men leaped and danced the whole time, and drums were beaten, and horns and flutes were played. It was just as it had been at his cousin's wedding. Allah was praised for every goal scored. Shame was felt for every mistake. And everywhere, men smiled, and danced, and sang. Anwar had been surprised that he saw no western clothes. The sides of the stadium were a solid mass of white dishdashas and ghutras, broken only by the dark faces and the black of igals and beards. After the game his father had bought them samousas to eat and 7-Up to drink, and Anwar had watched the Trade Centre from the back of the taxi as they drove home. It had taken a long time to disappear below the horizon.

One night a thick fog crept in from the Bristol Channel. From the roof of the Brewery I watched it flowing up the streets of the old docks quarter, oozing through the short tunnels under the railway embankment. The few shapes that moved about below me, huddling in groups around their fires or gathering at

visiting food-wagons, disappeared below the tide of grey. I turned with it and watched its advance. It rose until it lapped over the rooftop and chilled my feet, but then channelled its energy into moving north. I followed, keeping a little behind its leading edge, crossing the rooftops past the covered market, dodging air vents that reared out of the darkness, jumping the gaps over alleyways as they were swallowed. When I reached Duke Street I stopped, facing the bulk of the city's castle. The wide road cut across in front of me, marking the edge of the conglomeration of shopping streets, the boundary of a world that was never looked over. There were no towers in that part of Cardiff, no chance that someone could be above you, looking down, nothing that dimensioned the space above your head, just the limiting, defining, enclosing darkness.

I watched as the fog slid up the castle walls and invaded the gateway. Soon it was overrun, leaving only the Clock-tower and the central Keep visible above the flow. It continued north, filling the valleys I couldn't see, drowning villages and towns, smothering their prejudices, blinding their eyes, and I lay on the edge of the flat roof, and slept.

Four weeks before the start of college, Anwar's father took him, in a taxi, to Dubai city. At first, his father said, it all looks very new. The hotels were large and unnaturally clean, with palm trees unbowed by the wind and deep green lawns where there should be pale sand. Banks and shopping centres trailed lines of chattering people. The waterfront shone with glass and steel. But the old hides under the skirts of the young, he said, and took Anwar to see the city that had been there in his own youth.

The Creek snaked a path through the city, dividing it. The sea-inlet pretended

to be a river, tattooed by the wakes of the Abras as they ferried huddles of workers and shoppers. Dhows stood three-deep against the wharves while sun-hardened Pakistanis and Omanis unloaded crates of chickens, boxes of radios, red-and-chrome children's bikes, or untied Japanese cars from their decks. All the while, through the noise, the smells and the colours, it was the sense of constant movement, and the sheer volume of it, that left Anwar's mouth open and his eyes bright. Across the road from the wharf, a small archway led to the old souk, where the sun never looked, and the colours were dim. But spices clawed through the air to scratch at the hair in his nose and tickle the roof of his mouth, and human noise never asked permission, and motion never stopped when you got in its way. Small rooms seemed to open out into the alleyways, where old men would wrap kettles in plastic bags, and cowed women would drive their hands into sacks of flower heads and seed pods and brittle leaves. Men would argue over prices, accuse each of trying to impoverish the other and then shake hands and smile. Bare-headed labourers head-carried sacks bigger than themselves, weaving through the crush of bodies. The crowd sometimes parted, without warning, to barely allow a hand-cart to be pushed through, and then closed-in tightly behind it. Nothing was ever dropped. nobody ever fell. Anwar saw a few corners of stillness as they swept by. A man sat on a step, drinking tea from a small glass, another smoked a cigarette, held between upturned fingers, flicking ash from his white sleeves, a third bent double below a wall-rack of knives, bare-chested, washing blood from his arms with water from a bucket. Never had Anwar seen so many people in one place, smelled so many bodies, heard so many voices. Never had he felt as though he knew so little.

That afternoon Anwar's father took him to one of the new hotels at the mouth of the Creek. They were taken to a room near the top, with large windows that showed the spread of the city. The Abras left spiders' threads behind them as they crossed the water. Tower after tower could be seen, tall, untroubled, serene. They all looked down on the people that were too small to see, too fragile to matter, only noticeable by the effort of their passing, by the waves on the water, the moving stream of metal on the road. Anwar asked his father if they could go back to the souk before they went home.

The mountains shifted as I slept, turning to watch my dream move north through the valleys. Their gaze made me uncomfortable, and then their disinterest hurt. They should have welcomed me, and smiled, and nudged each other with proud elbows, but all that flowed down their sides was scorn and rejection, as though they were the arbiters of honour and truth. The sun broke behind the forestry lookout tower and chased the night down the opposite hillside. Autumn greens and fern-golds brushed against the grey slate roofs and grey stone walls and grey hearts, and a single blast of orange tile glared smugly at the dawn. Black surrounded the orange — black tarmac and faded white lines, and shredded netball hoops and rusted climbing frames. I lay on the hard surface and looked up at a fat face dripping saliva into my eyes, and spreading it over my cheeks with stubby fingers. I sat in the middle of a jeering crowd of grimy knees and pointing fingers and sing-song voices. In the silence I saw a towering father's head shake away its disappointment and turn back to its gardening. The loose gravel burned my fingers and rubbed itself against the underside of my legs, leaving a smell of weakness, a taste of sadness.

But from the rocking-stone on top of the mountain the town was nothing more than a gentle undulation in the valley floor. Grey with a spot of orange. Motionless and almost inaudibly humming to itself. Nothing so empty of people could carry something as heavy as a threat. If you shouted at it, it didn't react. If you turned your back on it, it didn't reach out for your collar or clip you on the head with the back of its hand, the one with the heavy gold ring. You could jump and scream and swear and nobody would even know it was you.

Except that the forestry tower was taller, and you'd never been able to climb over the wire fence, and the daylight had showed them where you were, so they could shout rhymes and laugh and piss on you.

Anwar's grandfather had asked to see him before he left for Dubai city.

The old man looked after a small flock of goats in the rocky foothills to the north, and Anwar took one of his last days to walk across the narrow band of dunes. The old man's hut stood on a crest by the side of an unpaved track. There was one room, a tin roof, tin walls, and thick wallpaper from his sister in Abu Dhabi. The pattern was of large yellow flowers on a green and brown background. The wrinkled shape of the man sat in the open doorway on a folding chair, watching the horizon across a fleece of pale sand.

Anwar stood out of his grandfather's field of vision for a while, thinking how wise he looked, how there could be nothing of importance that he did not know. Anwar wondered if the old man had ever been to the city, and whether he approved of his grandson's actions. The grandfather called him over with slight movements of his right hand, seconds before Anwar was about to make his presence known.

They sat for a while, saying little after the ritual of Allah's blessings and family health. The sun moved across the desert and bent the shadows of the few palms they could see, stirring them around their trunks like teaspoons. Once they saw the almost transparent form of a fox, moving among the darker areas between the high dunes. Once they were passed by a crowd of Europeans in noisy Landrovers, who stopped for a few seconds to look at the wallpaper from across the road. As night approached they shared their prayers, washing their hands and feet in the sand, unrolling their mats. Afterwards, they sat again and shared tea, and some bread and mutton, and the old man put his hand on Anwar's shoulder and looked him in the eye, as though to check that all the important lessons had been absorbed over the years. It seemed to satisfy him, and he said goodnight and went inside to his bed-roll.

Some twenty metres from the hut stood an outcrop of rock. A pale white glow picked out its shape in the black of the sudden night. Anwar stood and

crossed the track to stand at its side. In the last few years his grandfather had added stones to increase its height and width, so that the city could not be seen from the doorway. Anwar leaned against its side, watching the lights twinkle through a thin layer of dust and smoke. In the foreground, central to the view, the Trade Centre tower climbed out of a lattice of supporting searchlights. For a moment, Anwar thought he could see two trails of yellow light swoop down from the top, curving in a graceful arc, never quite reaching the ground. He rubbed his fingers gently against the wind-scoured outcrop at his side...

...and in front of a fading night I swept my hand along the edge of the parapet, and watched the sand trickle through my grasp.

Roger Stone has had over thirty stories and articles published in magazines and anthologies, with more forthcoming. He made a memorable appearance in TTA3 with the highly acclaimed story Four Miles to the Hotel California.

The Thinking Man

Kat Ricker

Kat Ricker holds a BA in English and Theater from Youngstown State University. She lives in a small lakeshore town in Ohio with an albino rat named Lucy. (And makes great coffee.)

The yellow man
With the crooked teeth
Just hobbles up and down the sidewalk.
Every day, that's all he does.
Once he wore a hat, the
Brown leather kind with earflaps
And a brim that couldn't
Hold back all the thoughts;
They ran all through his hair
Like lice and ate the sun
That would have shined there.
His eyes fluttered beneath the
Siege, and I saw them, swimming,
Writhing green stalks without root,
Swallowing each other like licks of fire.
I screamed from the window—
He looked at me, smiled for the understanding,
And walked on.

THUNDERHEAD

GARY COUZENS

Storm Scene

Lightning, and momentarily the iron-grey sky is white. Less than a second later comes thunder in its wake, an open-throated roar. Rain falls hard and vertical, bouncing pellets off the roofs of parked cars, prickling puddles into hedgehog spines. Trees bend in the whistling howl of the wind.

Flash.

So safe in here. Briony presses her face, her palms, against the window, watching the storm. The crash of thunder. She shivers. Her breath mists a circle on the window. She presses the length of her body against the cold glass, closer still. Her heart is palpating, her breathing ragged. With the next flash and crash she closes her eyes, her nostrils flared, her lips parted.

In her mind she travels out, through the glass, outside its protection. Where it cannot save her from the lightning searing her sight, the thunder her hearing, so much brighter and louder now. Where the rain comes down on her, reducing her hair to a straggle, filling her mouth and nostrils and soaking through her clothes so rapidly it's as if she's naked. Where she's powerless in the dark and violent heart of the storm. At one with it, its force inside her, its kick inside her brain, its coursing through her body to her fingers and toes. Its full strength would overwhelm and obliterate her in an instant, but a little of it she can take inside her. And control.

Phone Call (1)

"Hello?"

"Briony..?"

"Hello?"

"Briony, it's me — Paul."

"Hello, Paul."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay."

"Thank God. I was afraid the phone lines'd be down."

"No, they're not."

"I can see that. Look, I'm not going to be able to get home, love. No trains are running in this weather."

"Oh, right."

"Look, are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay."

"You seem a little... disconnected."

"No, I'm okay."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"Take care. I'll see you tomorrow."

Click.

Wet Through: A Memory

Briony is at the window, watching the rain, when Paul comes home. He staggers inside, shaking out his umbrella. His hair is flattened, white streaks of scalp visible through the smeared wet black lines.

"Jesus," he says. "*Christ*. What a cloudburst."

He stands on one leg and pulls off his shoe. He tips it up and a thimbleful of water pours out. His clothes are heavy and clinging.

"I'm wet through."

"Stay right there." She hurries to get a towel. He undresses and she rubs him down. The hairs on his arms, his fleshy buttocks, his rounded stomach, lie like smudged streaks. With the wet and cold, his penis has shrunk into itself.

"It's a mess, isn't it? Got caught in the rain." He flicks water at her.

"Hey, stop it! You'll get my blouse wet."

"Then you'll just have to take it off, then..."

Her smile twists up at the corner. "Then you'll just have to rub me down, won't you...?"

"Mmm, that's a tempting thought..."

The towel is soaked; she fetches a new one and continues to dry him. Through the cloth she feels his limp penis slowly stiffening.

Phone Call (2)

She reaches across the bed for the phone. "Hello?" The voice at the other end is crackly. "Hello?" she says. When he answers, she says flatly: "Hello, Paul." Why is her husband ringing her up now?

The other man has his arms about her. She lies on her side, one leg draped lightly over his hip. He draws her T-shirt and bra-strap away from her shoulder, kisses and nuzzles the bare warm skin. She bats at him playfully with her fingers.

"Yes, I'm okay."

He runs his hands up her sides under the T-shirt, tracing the swell of her hips, the sharp butterfly points of her pelvic bone, the in-curve of her waist, round to her back to tug at the tight elastic of her bra.

"No, they're not."

He fumbles with the clasp. Her brow creases in annoyance. *So inept. That wasn't the idea...* "Oh, right," she says. He unhooks it at last, then lifts up her T-shirt and touches her nipple with the tip of his tongue.

"Yes, I'm okay." Annoyance. "No, I'm okay." A soothing voice.

He kneels on the bed and lifts up her legs, resting them on his shoulders. A sudden urge to giggle; she immediately stifles it. Slowly he draws her knickers up, pulling slowly away from the white buttocks, the untanned part of her.

"Yes." Said both to the man on the phone and the man on her bed.

Her Incubus

The other man. His name is Adam. That's what she calls him.

She watches him lying on the bed facing her. She runs her fingers along his side, marvelling at the firmness, the solidity of his flesh. He has blond curly hair and blue eyes. Blue as water, blue as ice.

The texture, the detail... As if he might dissolve into the storm from whence he came.

His hand rests in the thick mat of hair on his chest, lazily traces a ring about his nipple.

His only garment is a black jockstrap. She runs her hand down his washboard-flat chest, cups the bulge with her hand.

He stands up, turns away from her. With a swift movement he removes the jockstrap. She drapes her arms about his waist, runs her tongue down the base of his spine, kisses and nuzzles his tight buttocks. She reaches round and strokes his jutting penis; at first softly, then more vigorously.

My Adonis. My secret lover. My incubus.

Storm Warning

It's been humid for days; the sky is a sickly grey. There'll be a storm tonight. The Met Office has issued an official warning: stay indoors. Do not travel unless absolutely necessary.

Briony drives homewards. Her clothes, so apt earlier, seem unfitting now: sleeveless top, short skirt, sunglasses. Her skirt has ridden up beneath her, and the undersides of her thighs are red and sore from where the plastic car seat has scorched a line across them.

She stops at a petrol station. She fills the tank, then goes in to pay. The man behind the counter is a six-footer, ten inches taller than her. He makes conversation. She's aware he's taking a long look at the tops of her breasts. Caging her with his gaze. She tenses inside, stiffens her shoulders, tautens her chin and cheekbones. Warding-off signals. Is he astute enough to read them?

She pays and leaves, aware of his eyes on her back as she walks away.

As she drives the few remaining miles home, she sees it ahead of her in the sky. The thunderhead. A massy lump of dark grey cumulonimbus, flattened at the top like an anvil, rimmed with light. The wind is stronger now, as if the thunderhead is sucking everything into itself, into its black heart.

In The Bedroom

Only the bedside lamp is on, its weak-tea light barely filling the room, casting long shadows. They are both naked. She lies on her back on the floor, his head between her thighs.

A lightning flash turns the curtain momentarily white. She hears a splinter-

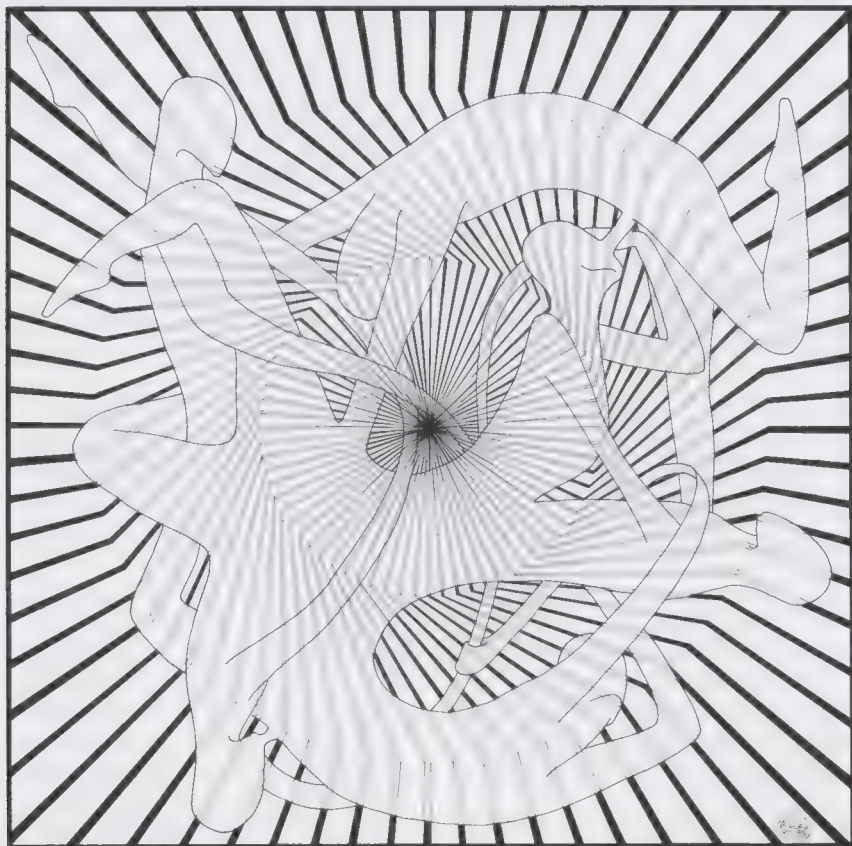
ing and a tearing from outside, then a *thump* that makes the floor vibrate. A tree must have been hit, perhaps that big oak outside. She pads over to the window. But she cannot see out. Tangles of raindrops blur her sight.

He stands behind her, his hand caressing the swell of her hip.

Another flash and the lamp fizzles and dies. Darkness. Not even the red LED display of the alarm clock. The power has failed.

Another flash and she sees his silhouette against the curtain.

She drops to her knees, her buttocks spreading slightly as they rest on her calves. She holds his waist for support. She leans forward, lightly closes her eyes and takes his penis into her mouth.



Spectral Crown

Paul watches through his car window. He has stopped in a lay-by and reclined his seat. He curls his legs up into his stomach, knotting and unknotting his muscles to get comfortable. He clutches his blanket to himself, but the cold seeps into his bones nonetheless.

The radio is useless, unlistenable. Too much static. He thinks of ringing Briony again on the car phone, just to make sure she's all right.

He pictures her; sexy little Briony. Everyone wanted to dance with her at the office party, Briony in heels and that short black dress, two inches of cleavage. Many of them did, slow dance after slow dance. He stood at the side and watched them.

Of course she's okay. She's at home. Safe and warm. It's me I have to worry about.

He's cold. He won't sleep. He has nothing to do but wait.

In the distance he sees the nearby town, a patch of deeper darkness amongst the hills. Lightning curls about the tallest building, a spectral crown.

Climax

Finally he moves on top of her. She slides her legs apart and feels him enter her. His greater weight presses down on her, sinks her into the mattress. Her fingers scrabble on his sweat-slick back. She gasps and moans, her eyes closing, her mouth opening, her back arching. Her thighs clasp his waist and he thrusts, thrusts, thrusts into her. Her climax is a sigh and a scream combined.

Lightning Strike

Paul shivers in his blanket. The storm is overhead now. The lightning flash and thunderclap are simultaneous.

Each flash bathes him in blue light, leaving red and green after-images.

And then an especially vivid flash, outlining the black bone-fingers of a tree. In the distance, an explosion.

The tree is moving.

Impossible. How-?

He has only a second to realise what has happened before the tree comes crashing down on his car. He feels little pain, just the sensation of his mouth filling with blood which spills over his clothes and the seat.

Aftermath

Briony awakes. She has slept fitfully. She puts on a dressing-gown and slippers and goes downstairs to the kitchen. The electricity is still out, so she lights the gas stove with a match and heats a saucepan of water for coffee. As she drinks it she sits on a stool and looks out the window.

The storm has left its wake of destruction. The patio is strewn with leaves and scattered fragments of the wooden fence. Out in the woods, although she doesn't know it yet, trees have snapped off half-way down their trunks and lie in a heap like so many matchsticks.

Did I do this? Briony thinks.

An Act of God. Force majeure. A wide area is in chaos. Remote villages are inaccessible, the roads cut off by fallen trees, electricity and telephone lines down, gas mains broken. Polythene has been seen blown in the wind, wrapping itself round pylons, causing them to short-circuit.

Briony bends forward, runs her fingers through her hair. Silence, the bone-weariness of exhaustion. The power has had its way with her, toyed with her, left her drained.

Reports of fatalities are slowly coming in. An old woman died when her chimney collapsed. A teenage boy was struck by lightning, the rain dousing his burning clothes. Emergency teams are working overtime to clear the roads, the major ones first. Electricity and telephone service will be restored as soon as possible, but in the more remote areas it'll be several days before it's done.

Briony sits alone.

Gary Couzens has had fiction in F&SF, Peeping Tom, Substance, and anthologies like Bizarre Sex & Other Crimes of Passion.

FISSURE

TIM
ALLEN

Tim Allen is the editor of the poetry magazine Terrible Work (£2.50 from 21 Overton Gardens, Mannamead, Plymouth PL3 5BX), and his own writing appears regularly throughout the small press.

The whole of her promotional video could be packed into one strip of leather. The entire fissure could be passed over as easily as the samaritan passes the Grand Hotel which is full of so much sadness and sorrow.

On stage the same props as used in the above mentioned video were anomalies lurching from one dimension to the next. The mystery of the lost footage.

Unremitting extremism finally killed off the dead.

Re-birth was delayed by an advertisement for the afterlife.

The city was segmented by the movements of her dance and zoned by the moods of her voice. Yet inhibition still clung to everything she did. Take a drug—and the drug will become you. I repeat the drug will 'become' you.

The depressing theories of Saussure are at least a comfort to those trapped on film.

The door broke down. It's no good blaming others.

By the end of the fast the 'ordinary' bloke had become holy but everything around him was ugly and rotting and mutating faster than his senses could register.

The insulation was shining.

THE INDIGO CASBAH

RHYS H. HUGHES

1 It was late afternoon when Miranda left the park in search of her lovers. She could escape the park, but not the leaves that swirled around her feet. And though she hurried, scarf fluttering, cigarette glowing brightly, these relics of autumn invariably followed her.

This year is dying quickly, she told herself. A fine drizzle had already conquered the broad branches of the cedars, the stonework, the iron railings. And now the wind shook a thousand silver droplets on an oblique fall; a new rain that covered Miranda as if with a veil of sadness. It was all sadness. Miranda even felt a tear burn the edge of her eyelids.

Or was it the dust?

Surely the dust, she decided. The other was unlikely; she never cried. Yet the gloom was unquestionably affecting. Daylight was fading rapidly; out on the street, the sodium lamps came on all at once. There, near the end of the road, the faulty one flickered like a wish. Miranda kept her gaze level with it. Wiping her face with the back of her gloved hand, she fought down impatience. The street was deserted. No cars passed, though the roar of the traffic surged in the unseen distance.

Was it really so desolate? It was as if a powerful decay had set in since she had last been here. Debris littered the way; rubbish that barred her path and made progress difficult. As she walked, stumbling occasionally, sighing frequently, she tried to shake off a growing unease.

Perhaps, for once, reality was not going to conform to her design. The truth

of this was made ever clearer as she neared Ian's house: not only was the amount of junk on the road increasing, but she also began to recognise its elements. Without her, she recalled with a shudder, he had always been a human focus of entropy.

So what could she expect now, after a whole month? It did not bear thinking about. A whole month! And it seemed much longer; she could scarcely see his face in her mind, though she knew what to expect there: the myopic eyes with the crescent of white under the iris always visible, the long black hair ruffled in a Neanderthal way that did not quite suit his slim build and narrow shoulders.

Her heart was snowbound by the time she reached the flickering streetlamp that had always marked out his house and made it unnecessary for her to remember his number. And now, she saw that the river of junk found its source here. It had broken the rusty iron gate off its hinges and spilled out into the street. She gasped. It was as if the whole house had been turned inside-out. No lights shone from downstairs but in the highest room there was a pale blue radiance. And higher still, the ruined chimney belched forth a dense black cloud.

Cautiously, Miranda clambered over broken furniture, cardboard boxes, bedsteads, mounds of mouldy carpets and waded slowly to the front door. She rang the bell. She waited.

There was no answer.

In desperation, she fumbled in her pocket for a coin and cast it in a graceful

arc at the high blue square of light. The resulting sharp crack brought thunder to her ears; with a faulting rumble, the window was drawn up. An arm thrust out and dropped something as if in return: a smouldering cigarette butt. Miranda was about to call out, but it was too late; the window rumbled shut again and the brief storm was over.

For the second time that day, and the second time in her adult life, a useless and improbable tear stained Miranda's cheek.

2 Books, thought Ian. Books and words. He paced the warped floorboards of the tiny room as if seeking stagnation, and consequent relief, in motion. His eyes darted over the window, wondered at the crack that had appeared from nowhere, and then returned to the fire. The iron grate glowed with a light far too steady for his taste. The absent possibilities of flicker.

When the seething column of books, stuffed as far up the chimney as it had been probable for him to reach, and ignited with a final bottle of poor cognac, had collapsed upon itself just a fraction more, he swooped on the opportunity to add another volume. Torn pages sucked themselves up the flue to doubtless emerge, in his imagination at least, as a series of banshee-heads, one after another, pale white with blazing hair, lines of age comprised of lines of prose, to drift over the city in a crumbling formation, without purpose, as ashen as himself.

It was slow work this; stoking the ideas of thousands back into the oblivion from whence they had been snatched without permission. He had created an easy chair upon which to rest when his frayed nerves would allow him. A sculpture of hardbacks; a use that gave him the illusion of revenge. In spite, he had finally attained a chair in mathematics; his booted feet rested on a footstool of philosophy.

Again he rolled a cigarette, tearing paper from the nearest Tolstoy at hand. If Miranda were here she would know what to do. If Miranda were here, there would be some clever solution or other. He lit the hallowed reefer with the charred cotton cover of a Goethe, plucked fresh from the furnace and burning blackly, in appropriate Faustian irony. Oily smoke greased eyes and lungs; he coughed in staccato rhythm. Smoking this parsley, tea and nutmeg mixture, in lieu of chopped tobacco, afforded as much pain as pleasure. The blood in his head boiled in slow circles, lovely as the amputee's swelling.

It had all started spiralling downwards when Miranda had left. She had followed a blond geophysicist across Europe, never more than eleven paces behind, among the galleries and castles, the cafés and puppet-shows of Corsica, Sicily and Rhodes. Certainly she had kept in touch; postcards had arrived without fail, detailing her progress (or regress?) from one mouldering city to another. Somewhere in Turkey she had lost him, or had selected a quarry travelling in the opposite direction, and was now coming back. Her journey, he gathered, had not been wasted. At one point she had been close enough to breathe up at the lightly freckled nape of his neck.

Two days after her first postcard, and fixed to her second by first-class static, he had found on his mat a letter of such ominous lightness that he surmised it was the first and last communiqué of some powerful source. His fears turned out to be completely justified: it was from a solicitor he had never heard of, from a town he had never heard of, and it announced that he had just inherited the nine-hundred and ninety-seven thousand dusty tomes that comprised the private library of his deranged and possibly heretical dead Uncle Daedalus.

The letter also managed to outline the circumstances surrounding the demise

of this eccentric worthy. Reaching high on a stepladder for a goatskin-bound edition of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and tugging with too ardent a determination, he had propelled himself backwards, arms windmilling, stepladder and book-shelf a-topple, into a void of golden literary dust. The will he had completed, as he lay among his own broken bones and plum bruises, on the flyleaf of the scornful classic, with a finger dipped into the pool of blood that filled his mouth like a bottomless well. The signature had been followed by an ironic inscription: Rest In Pieces.

Ian had twirled this letter thrice before folding it into a paper glider, affixing it in this new incarnation with a paperclip and filing it out of the window. He thought no more about the matter, but packed his bag and laced his boots for college. He did not have an Uncle Daedalus, and suspected one of Miranda's mordant jokes. The corn-flakes wedged themselves between his teeth as usual, but that morning he did not stop to pick and lever them free with the tines of a salad fork snatched from (and returned to) the cutlery drawer without even the courtesy of a cursory wipe on sleeve or trouser.

Instead, he had launched straight out into the grimy world, bag weighed down with secondhand dissertations and various adjuncts of his student status: a college scarf wrapped tight around zany sandwiches of chocolate and tabasco; a copy of that week's cult novel, a Lowry or Hesse; a flask of cold tea and another of hot beer; an elaborate clay pipe for smoking the pungent resins from incense lands far away, so far away that they never materialised; a hearty cough.

(He had once even ordered a tame bear from a Mail-Order Company, but had received merely a chain and broken manacle inside an enormous box full of straw and salmon-bones. This, even his most self-conscious colleagues had to

admit, was going too far; the powdering of shamefully healthy faces with chalk and the dipping of a paper carnation in green ink should have been enough. Ian was cowed, if not quite touched.)

Naturally, at college little happened. He satisfied himself fitfully by turning up at the wrong lecture-theatre and sitting through a rant on integral calculus, as opposed to the calculated internal rent that the doubts of Schopenhauer were supposed to tear in all smug self-assurance. He juggled with coins and oranges during the almost imperceptible shift from lecture to lunchtime and amused others by counting the caramel hairs on the legs of exchange-students, each hair more elegant by far than the home-grown variety, beyond appreciation some of them; beauties from shores of white chalets, the taint of sandalwood and coffee and croissants still on their joyous roots.

And then he had resumed afternoon studies, lounging on the grass embankment, nodding not quite in time to tinny jazz blown on blades of grass clasped between the thumbs of psychology graduates. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud; he had consulted seven droplets of rain on the tip of his nose before climbing painfully to his feet, blinking key-changes from damp lashes.

And then he had returned home...

There were forty-three streets to be negotiated before the comforting duvet and blind television were gained. His umbrella flapped in the sudden down-pour less like an injured crow than a muddy parrot. He used the tip to make modal music on the cemetery railings and then to scratch the bristles on his chin. His pride and bliss, this chin; the apotheosis of his student image. A three-day growth in five.

At the end of the thirty-seventh street, he had become aware of a dull ache in the region of his liver. An ache of some awful anticipation. These aches

did not come upon him for frivolous reasons; the last time he had suffered so had been the very minute before a suicide had jumped on him from the penthouse of a six-storey apartment block. Brow and suicide had struck pavement at same instant: it was an augur. Something quite momentous and horrible was about to happen.

This feeling grew stronger as he approached his own street, passing the greengrocer, the ironmonger, the coffee-house and those other shops that formed a row which belonged out of its time. My breath comes in short gasps now, he had thought abstractedly, as he speared crisp packets with his umbrella (the shower had moved on) and shook them free in the air. But he was calm enough when he finally reached his house and confronted the network of ramparts and sagging walls that had seemingly appeared from nowhere...

A brief glance was enough to confirm that the bricks of these elaborate fortifications were actually books. Thousands upon thousands of them; books of every possible size and description and smell, cemented together by dribbling ink. He was barred from his abode by an insurmountable barrier of learning. The books sealed the house like the walls of a cell, lacking doorways or windows, impenetrable. With fingers spread wide, he allowed himself a circuit of the ramparts, seeking a mode of entry. There was none. He retreated, confused. Not only were the walls too high to breach; they were also too thick.

Feeling like an insignificant element of chance in a monstrous game of mah-jong, he had then decided to tackle the problem with a more savage logic. To scale the barrier unaided would be to lose nerve and possibly literal face. He pictured siege-engines; onagers, trebuchets, ballistas, hurling mighty stones at the wordy defences. He considered the old reliable techniques of tunnels and

fire, of battering-rams and gunpowder plots. Finally, he called on a neighbour to borrow a ladder.

Once inside the house, he retreated into a kind of despairing darkness. He avoided staring out of the windows at the ponderous mass of literature. He boiled his leather belt in a rusty pan as a less than sanguine soup and raided pockets of forgotten jackets for furry mints. It was more than a fortnight later that he emerged, exhausted and extremely hungry, forcing a way through the mountains of books from the centre with a sledgehammer, eventually breaking through into a day that should have been hardly different from any other.

Two men from the Council were waiting, with an order demanding that the entire collection be removed within seven days. Otherwise the Council itself would take steps to remove it for him, charging him an extortionate sum for the privilege. Ian held this latest piece of paper and sat on the pavement and cried. The men from the Council patted him on the head and left.

His first impulse, in an effort to shift the responsibility away, was to telephone the solicitor who had originally sent him the letter. It was all a ludicrous mistake. Surely the matter would be cleared up with minimal fuss once the error was acknowledged? But he was unable to make contact; the operator claimed that no solicitor by that name was listed in any directory and that the number he had quoted was that of an isolated call-box somewhere in the middle of a Scottish moor.

A hoax then? But surely even Miranda would not have gone to such lengths for a mere joke? He placed an advert in the local paper designed to set the pulses of bibliophiles racing; no-one came. He set fire to the hateful objects; the average rain extinguished the blaze. He waited for thieves and opportunists to complete the task for him. But not a



single book was snatched. Not so much as a pocket Chatterton or the slimmest Shelley. The rain soaked through rare quartos and rarer folios, the wind dried them all a-flap like laughing mouths; but no element or agency came to relieve the burden for him.

Finally, as the Council deadline approached, Ian realised that he had little choice other than to move the whole collection into the house. He worked with a frantic energy, discarding furniture and other domestic trivia to make the necessary room. When the men from the Council returned, pork-pie hats askew, gold teeth aching and glinting, they found the reverse of what they had anticipated. Books now stuffed the house (it visibly sagged with the weight) while chairs, sofas and objets d'art cluttered up the driveway, pavement and road.

The Council men had nodded once to each other, no more, and walked on, hand in hand. Domestic rubbish was fine; stained beds and tables presented no problem in their officially bright eyes. Academic rubbish was another matter; a serious offence to morals, if not quite against the law. They knew that vehicles which attempted to use the road would soon come to grief among wardrobes, grandfather-clocks and Welsh-dressers, full of coathangers, springs and yellowing moths respectively. But they also guessed that the word would spread quickly; the tarmac of this thoroughfare would forsake its vulcanised lovers as easily as the flunk betrayed the cap and gown. Cheap despair and beer-crates alone would slide the passage, incongruous as grown men dancing.

Now Ian sought to regain himself. He kept a sixteen-hour vigil of purpose each day. As time passed, he became convinced that the mysterious Uncle Dædalus had owned at least a single copy of every book that had ever been printed. He also began to suspect that his task would defeat him. He could destroy no

more than twelve volumes an hour; limitations of size of grate and durability of storm-tempered paper had imposed this figure on him. One hundred and ninety-two books per working day. Just over seventy thousand in a year. It would take him more than fourteen years to be free. The smoke would cover the world and fill the lungs of new, aspiring writers.

"Miranda, where are you?" he howled, rising to his feet again and kicking his way over to the window. The flickering streetlamp petrified his features into those of an ancient waxwork, sallow skin bubbling in the half reflection of the blue glass. To peer outside, he had to place his forehead against the cool square and shield the corners of his vision with his hands. Not all was silence. With leaves, dust, a discarded glove, the wind played chess on the patio.

3 So Miranda was aghast, but consoling herself to great effect with each passing street and second. Her hair, which had been tied back with a green ribbon, now flared loose in auburn ecstasy and her eyes, the paler green of very early morning, took in her surroundings in a secret, knowing way. Ian could be struck off the list then, she decided without resentment; there would always be others. The love of the new was, for her, an ache and not an affection; a genuine delicious fear.

The streets in this drear student quarter were all named after a different sexual position, where some city official, weary of poets, trees and battles, had resorted to the nearest attempt he could make at humour. More likely, Miranda thought, with all of her dear and disconcerting ingenuity, they represented an analogue of all their futile exhaustions, working their way into each and every night only to find aborted time waiting.

Half a myopic mile ahead, a furtive student crept out of a house with a bouquet of monstrous roses. Miranda doub-

led her strides, in both length and velocity, until she could see that he wore neo-motley and torn trousers; such finesse had obviously been gleaned from long hours in no mirror. His hair had been badly combed with a plastic knife; he crouched now over a leaf-choked puddle to make a final adjustment to quiff with said implement. Miranda felt naked desire for this careful inelegance mixed with distrust and a purer love.

She followed him closely until he became so nervous that he slinked off down an alleyway and started running. "Where are you going little man?" she called after him, as she gave chase. Her fingers and thumb seemed connected by an unborn pinch to his taut buttocks. She did not require an answer. A girlfriend was doubtless lingering somewhere, rehearsing a sequence of coy smiles, stomach a-knotted; she would receive this gift with a small clap and smaller jump. She might even perceive in this offering of flowers the thorns of future dissatisfaction as romance became relationship and finally stasis. But not if Miranda had her way. If Miranda had her way, she would not receive them at all.

Fifteen minutes later, Miranda re-emerged from the alley, clutching her prize, with the red itch of a stubbled kiss firmly aglow on her chin. She shed petals as she walked, idly scuffing them among the leaves that tripped no less rosy at her feet. Now, distractions permitted, there was no obstacle to hamper a perfect reunion with Michael, her second lover.

Michael too was an undergraduate, but with this difference: he was a poet who preferred prose to verse, and an intellectual who rated listening more highly than talking. He lived in Flanquette St, but spent most of his time wandering the pubs and basement clubs that spread their webs of sound and smoke and puns directly over the hub of the student quarter, where Croupade Av

and Missionary Rd, those twin (and some would say antithetical) promenades of leisure and duty collided in a brash of colour, smell and life.

Her melancholy had not only worn off by now, but had been transformed into wide-eyed appreciation of the ironies that wailed their sardonic justice all around her. She trotted down Florentine Place, swinging the requisitioned bouquet like a cat, ready for a saucy lunge at any other man who let her come within slapping distance. Headly electronic music, microtonal and polyphonic, warbled from a shuttered house; amplified brass and woodwind threatened to slip over the edge of the sound-spectrum and begin afresh from the bass rumble, reminding her fleetingly of the soprano squeak of a million bed-springs and the thump of a million headboards on grimy walls.

This, of course, was an ongoing Entropy Party, a craze that had caught on during the summer and showed few signs of abating. Such parties combined aesthetics and hedonism with a grim rite of passage for unlucky freshers. The format was simple enough: a group of young people would seal themselves, Prince Prospero fashion, into a suitable residence and then embark on a continuous exploration of revelry and debauch that would last until the demise of the first celebrant. It could take weeks or even months, though with the sheer amount and potency of some of the substances being peddled around campus by acid-scarred chemistry lecturers was more often measured in hours. Miranda had attended a handful of Entropy Parties herself; the novelty had worn thin with the first overdose, and completely dissipated with the ninth haemorrhage. She was closed to such pleasures.

An absurdity more in keeping with her mood could be found a little further along in the broad swathe of demolished Viennese Oyster Terrace. Here, or so ur-

ban myth would have it, a post-doctoral physics student had once succeeded in manufacturing and detonating, in his sink, a small thermonuclear device; so small that it had caused no damage whatsoever to anything at all. But the Council (again with a wit that was staggering) had decided that although there was no crater to mark the folly there at least ought to be one. Bulldozers had cleared the designated space; sweating labourers armed with picks and shovels had added the finishing touches. The legally contaminated students had been evacuated to Brighton, their clothes and possessions incinerated or donated to Eastern Europe.

New workmen now occupied the space, their candystripe tents and corrugated shacks standing amid the rubble and twisted ends of fractured water-pipes. They were rebuilding Viennese Oyster Terrace on overtime; Miranda saw their swarthy faces blinking in the unsteady light of flickering lamps, chipped mugs of chicory raised to chapped lips, warty fingers flicking whatever detritus could be mined from either nostril or ear-hole. As always, there was at least one who caught her eye. She leered out of the shadows and wolf-whistled herself hoarse, thrusting her fist forward at an unmistakable, though not obtuse, angle.

Afterwards, satiated and relatively happy, Miranda sought out the pubs of the hub, stepping from a sidestreet straight into the purgatory of Missionary Rd. Fumes slapped her in the face; dishevelled crazies launched themselves in front of speeding cars; prostitutes of both sexes beckoned from balconies or shady doorways; dogs yapped; peripatetic alcoholics buried their faces in their hands and sang softly; vomit flowed its ochres and purples down to a moonless gutter.

Glass crunching under her feet in a wholly inappropriate yuletide rhythm,

Miranda studied and rejected first one pub and then another. Their names vainly tried to awaken her sense of wonder: The Nonchalant Pygmy, The Failed Men, The Unsteady Aardvark, The Throwback And Pickle, The Greasy Tension. She had a nose for Michael's presence, as if his tubular angst threw an electromagnetic field around his body that she could detect. He was in none of these tormented dives; but he was close. She licked her lips and frowned.

At last, right in the very centre of all, she squinted at a tall red-brick affair that had been thrown up during her absence and lingered at the door. The hardwood sign was missing from the metal bracket above the entrance (a rangy dog swung in its place; a student jape) but the name was duplicated in neon on the slanting roof: The Indigo Casbah. This one seemed worth a visit, Michael or no, and so she gingerly pushed her way through the small crowd that jammed the short corridor that connected without to within.

Once inside, she donned sunglasses in the murk and tried to appear both relaxed and tense. The mazy chaos of stairways, little rooms, passages, galleries and tunnels defied systematic search. After ascending spiral steps and veering off down a curved walkway that swayed over the main bar, she found herself in a broad chamber near the top of the building. A low stage dominated one end of the room, stacked with unplucked instruments and idle amplifiers. And there, sandwiched between his other literary friends around a squat table, Michael puffed sullenly on a hookah and tore a sodden beer-mat into a dozen abstract sculptures.

Miranda twisted through the packed bodies and reached the table, clambering over its drink-infested surface, scattering glasses and ashtrays, both empty and full, to the four corners of her vantage. She threw the battered and ravished

bouquet down in front of Michael, a gesture with more of the duel challenge about it than the love offering, and lowered herself between him and his nearest colleague, a cheek on each chair and her centre of gravity above the gap between; a position that had much of the perilous and winsome in its keeping. Then, with a great deal of determination and a gritting of the teeth, she embraced her lover and contemplated a kiss.

"How do?" In Michael's reedy voice the question was neither greeting nor presumption. Miranda turned to regard the student her other leg was twitching against. He was a broad northerner engrossed in reconstructing some mythical battle with figurines of pewter. Rimless glasses flared over the uglies of the Goblin Kingdom. Miranda selected a single rose from the pile in front of Michael and presented it to her new whim, sweeping dragons and demons clear of the beery field of carnage. In response, he very nearly found the courage to glower; but his name was Neil. Miranda retrieved the flower for herself.

"Seeing you again is a fate worse than bliss," she said, turning once more to Michael. "I hope you've been behaving yourself badly. And I also trust that your depression has been keeping well?"

"Watch this now." Michael indicated the stage. A group of musicians were climbing up onto the platform, trailing wires and plugging in a selection of black unadorned boxes. "Anti-noise generators. I've been waiting weeks for this. See the cellist? It's his first gig since he was kicked out of music-college for destroying the brain of one of his tutors. A composition entitled 'Geiger Counter Revolutionary' or so I gather. Novelty waxes."

Miranda sighed and borrowed the nearest drink at hand, promising to repay its lender with interest before the end of the decade. At one point she had been worried that reality was going to

escape her manipulations. Now she did not care; and with apathy came the certainty that it would not.

"You don't understand who these people are," continued Michael. "This really is something new. A phoenix forged from the filings of all predecessors. A band of tonal terrorists." He reached inside his jacket and presented her with a folded poster, doubtless torn from some rotting hoarding. Miranda unfolded it and studied the sans serif lettering superimposed upon a polarised photograph of Istanbul's Kapali Carsi, the largest covered bazaar in the world. The poster merely fêted the opening of The Indigo Casbah as a vital centre for live music. Tracing with her finger the dates and bands listed alongside them, all with conventional avant-garde names (The Undivided Amoebae, The Spectre Bridegroom, The Vindaloo Bottoms), Miranda eyed both present date and band without a murmur. The smoke of Michael's hookah curled the question-mark for her.

"Admirable Restraint," she read. "Neither jazz nor folk nor croon. Music for saintly sinners and radical reactionaries as writ and performed by Messrs Horner, Tuppence, Jakob and de los Rios with the superlative skills of Mistresses Clancy and Tourmaline to yeast the brew." She crumpled poster into a wrinkled sphere and used bottle to bat it high over diverse heads. "What does this signify then? A minimalist extravaganza?"

"In one way only." Michael indicated her full glass. "Can I buy you another drink?" He jangled the change in his pockets with such reluctance that she nodded vigorous assent. He threaded between friends and bearded acquaintances and headed towards the bar. Miranda took the opportunity for her first real appraisal of the decor. Blue tiles and bluer draperies, shifting towards the purple in the red glow of cigarettes and pipes. Glib and not a little salty, she finally decided.



Michael returned with cider and crisps, resuming his seat with a groan. By this time, the musicians had fully plugged in and tuned up. Miranda used the brief hiatus to try to renew contact. "Have you seen Ian lately? I'm worried about him. He won't answer his door. Perhaps you could call on him sometime, if you're passing? I mean, don't go out of your way."

Michael raised a finger to his lips for silence. The band had assumed their positions on the stage and were composing themselves with moody expressions and jaunty hat angles. A slightly unusual format even by modern standards, Miranda noted; bass, cello, keyboards and drums augmented not by guitar and vocalist but saxophone and flute. She made a conscious decision to enjoy the music, whatever the result. Michael was craning forward, pulling at his ears with savage jerks as if to increase their efficiency. Miranda tried to catch the gaze of the drummer.

Suddenly, with no warning, and as a single unit, the group unleashed a crack of sound. Taken completely by surprise, Miranda dropped her drink into the lap of Neil, the armchair warlord, who was too paralysed by a similar shock to notice. She had the ludicrous impression that everyone in the audience was being crushed in a fist of harmony; glasses and tiles frosted and splintered. The music, so loud that it seemed nonexistent, had clutched the root of her mind with a soapy hand and was massaging her spinal cord, or else using it as a bell-rope to ring her brain, with firm yet tender strokes.

It truly was remarkable: she had heard nothing quite like it in all her plastic twenty-one years. But it was as familiar as nitrogen; unseen and all-persuasive, waiting simply for self-discovery. She stood on a beach, as warm as a crab in the setting sun, and placed an ear to the sand. A great vibration suffused nature,

not quite a scream, but a sound to which the breakers and whisperings of grains belonged merely as feedback. The real tune. Or was it a forest? Green and gold parrots took the notes in their beaks and dropped them, one at a time, into a lilac river that rippled like an escalator down to a salt-marsh. And now she was floating through the sky, delectable dirigible, nosing through a candyfloss cloud...

Shivering, she rubbed her vision back into focus. A single high-pitched whine squealed off into the void. The band had abandoned their instruments and were packing away their electronics. Miranda shook her head and squinted at a clock above the stage. Less than three minutes had passed in the blink of an id. "Scur-rility!" she hissed through numb palate. With a sprouting of springs, the clock tumbled to its doom.

"What did you think?" Michael eased his grinning face into her own and arched an eyebrow. Around them, bodies were collapsing in an overdramatic way; a few were still breathing. Others fused and sputtered. "I guessed that it would have less effect on you. I knew it. Did you escape into one of your visions? You are above such things as beauty, strangeness, charm and death."

Miranda painfully massaged her neck muscles, which were sealed together with the wax of eternity. "What happened?" she wheezed. This was more than the usual half-baked nonsense. "Out of the microwave and into the reactor, I say. Be a good little Michael and tell me."

Michael chewed fingernails and laughed, his words tickling cuticles and gaseous knuckles. "The music of the Spheres. Quite simple really. Imagine a group who have spent several years analysing all forms of music from the dim time when the first *Homo erectus* struck stone against stone to the sparky present. And now imagine that such a group have managed to strip down all

the best elements of everything they have studied into the one perfect tune."

"I don't understand." Miranda clutched her knees and rocked on her chair. She understood all too well; the music had been waiting for her much in the same way that a thumbscrew waits for a fleshy digit to pulp. "Why are people dying? Fresher's Week is over."

"You haven't been listening. You know how a really good tune lodges itself in the brain and refuses to budge?" Michael relished this chance to play expert to Miranda's pupil. "And how the better the tune, the longer it stays in the mind, often to the exclusion of other things? Well then, what else would the perfect tune do if not lodge in the brain forever, to the exclusion of absolutely everything? Would it not override even such involuntary functions as respiration and heartbeat? Surely it would expand in the mind until there was no room left at all. Protection would have to be sought. They had anti-noise generators to shield them. You had your genius..."

Miranda scratched her head. There would always be room in her unsegmented lobes. But was this the sort of thing she ought to condone or despise? She eased herself a little with a few of the ownerless drinks. "So why are you still alive? How special can a poet be?"

"Tone-deaf." Michael exhaled and his eyes watered. "If only I could do for literature what they have done for music! Think about it: the perfect novel, a part of all other novels and yet aloof and fatal. But to write it, I would have to spend years researching history, psychology, ethics, philosophy and so much else, making furious notes as I read. So it is impossible. I would have to lock myself in a library and live there undetected."

Miranda yawned. She was tired. "An ambitious project. You could always find a private library. Or else give up writing and take up morris-dancing instead." She sipped cloudy cider and winced as

the acid found a constellation of cavities amid the pearly sky of her back teeth. "Hi ho and all that."

"The perfect novel!" Michael had crawled into the flue of his pipedream and was stuck fast there. Or else he had covered up the fingerholes and was blowing a single fantasy. "A story so fetching that it cannot be shaken loose from memory. A story that will obsess to the point of death..."

Miranda stood up and picked her way over the corpses.

Michael shook his head. "You'll never escape. The Indigo Casbah was modelled on the Great Labyrinth at Knossos. Once inside you are trapped forever. There are drinkers here who have been lingering at the bar since the very beginning."

Ignoring him, Miranda thought only of her bed and the dawn that would be racing to fondle her. A wondrous fiery Ariadne, she followed her trail of shed petals through a hundred twists and turns to the cool air of still bustling streets. Time as well as motion and music was beginning to bore her. She felt as if she had been living through a fable. She wondered: would it be a contradiction in terms to claim that it had been an amoral fable?

More fun.

4 Autumn rattled feebly into winter; a season Miranda had always considered a parody of itself, with gales and rain that swept up under lowered heads and silences that were too frosty to be broken by anything other than the slurp of mulled wine.

With a mouth full of cloves and lusts all unbuttoned down the front, she adopted each city park as her private garden. Again she could escape such parks, but not the leaves that swirled around her feet; only this time the leaves were loose pages that lay on each surface, whether it be bench or branch or railing-spike, like creamy shadows. When she reached

down to pick one up, she saw that it was charred around the edges and generally worthless.

One time, she thought she saw a man who looked like Ian collecting these shards of knowledge and stuffing them into an enormous sack. And then she recalled everything: that she was alive in this sorrowful world and, once, had owned two lovers, a recluse and a poet.

She even dimly heard echoes of that disturbingly archetypal music, but managed to shake it away with a single flick of hair over shoulders. The figure who looked like Ian had vanished; it must have been another defensive mirage. But there was something moving in her womb; as if the notes had seeded in her a resolution of a different kind.

It had always been possible to traverse the entire city by winding through the parks and crossing a few main roads to others, as she had once traversed a whole day in front of the television, switching between channels to catch each and every news report. And now, without knowing how or why, she found herself in the student quarter again: the faulty streetlight, the row of antiquated corner shops, the crumbs of a new batch of students, pink-cheeked and soft-shoed, mercury fillings nagging in the chill and odourless breeze.

Passing the grocer's store, she nearly crashed into Michael, who emerged with a bulging brown bag which he promptly dropped, unaware of the near miss. Miranda helped him to pick up the dented tins and bruised fruit and he stood and made a tiny cough. "I did as you asked. I called on Ian. I've moved in with him." He shuffled his feet and added warily: "We're writing a book."

Miranda smirked. "Oh yes, the perfect novel." Somehow she found herself walking back with him, carrying his groceries with a hollow sort of sympathy. "Ian never struck me as the literary type."

Michael lingered a few steps behind. "He's a little verbose. He uses twenty-nine words where twenty-seven would suffice. We take it in turns. We have a routine, you see. In the mornings I buy the food while he collects the pages of the books he tried to destroy. The heat in the grate, he tells me, was so intense that whole volumes of Priestley and Conrad escaped unharmed up the chimney. In the afternoons, one of us does the reading while the other writes. We're on page seven-hundred and ninety-five already."

"And what do you do in the evenings?" Miranda paused and looked up. They had reached Ian's house. The junk still cluttered up pavement and road, though by now the individual components had decayed and flowed into one indistinguishable mass; a semi-organic growth. "May I come in?" She caught the glint of the house-key as Michael held it up.

Michael stared at his feet and squirmed uncomfortably. He cleared his throat again and opened his mouth, gulping like a perch, his fingers playing a sonata on his thighs, his nostrils twitching. He tried to speak, but could produce only a stutter of no content. Eventually he composed himself a little, though he still avoided her eyes. "Sorry. We don't. I mean to say, that in the evenings we..."

Miranda handed him the shopping-bag and turned away. She did not look back even once. The anxiety of the moment had claimed her. She suddenly knew that all consciousness was terrible, and that all existence was conditional on nothing; nothing at all. It would never change, atom ground against atom, star against star. We are like colliding galaxies, she thought fearfully, we merely pass through each other without touching. Surprisingly, however, when she felt her face, her cheeks were still dry.

Approaching her, hands in pockets, a callow fresher ambled in ignorant bliss. Miranda murmured to herself and strai-

ghtened her back. But perhaps it is what you make it after all, she mused, chewing the cliché to bits and spitting out the pips. As soon as he was in range, she clasped him in her arms and held him fast, her stomach rumbling and her hair standing all on end.

It took but a single brush of a fingernail down his shirt-front to pop all his buttons. She removed scarf and hat and spectacles and loosened his belt, then turned him around and pinched his bottom. As he ran screaming back the way he had come, she called after him: "You have the makings of a blond geophysicist in you." She waited a full minute before following, with a steady sure step.

Already the day was brightening. Once more, she felt that she could cope with the endless uncertainties that an infinity of diverging futures would present to her, on a platter not quite silver. She began to sing. No melody but the only one. She capered, she crouched. And when again she raised her hand to her face, she stroked what she had nearly expected; but for a different reason.

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Letters

from Martin Deighton

Please find enclosed requisite wonga for one subscription to TTA. Reason: TTA4 was the best single edition of a small press magazine since BBR #21. I've been watching TTA improve with each issue until it now replaces BBR as *the* British avant-garde magazine. It sounds backhanded to praise a mag for its regularity, but it *is* important—and one thing's for sure: you can't love a mag that ain't there!

Another major asset to TTA is its visual style: those black and white covers are highly distinctive and a refreshing contrast to the 'colour über alles' aspirations of other magazines. I'm not sure that the select-a-font headings are conducive to the overall image, but the recent innovation of including self-contained artwork was highly effective—I hope this idea will be developed. Most magazines will print any picture with tits in it; TTA's choices have shown unusual discernment in this area.

I find the letters page a bit too conventional. I've no doubt you get plenty of letters praising TTA to the skies, but they don't make particularly interesting reading. It can also breed an unbecoming air of self-promotion about the magazine, something which has always been one of *Interzone's* least agreeable features. I for one would like to see a more contentious letters page; I also think there is scope for more wide-ranging discussion and criticism, or anything else for that matter—I feel the letters should reflect the kind of diversity and experimentalism that distinguishes the fiction. Though of course you actually have to receive these letters before you can publish them...

from Alan Baker

I find myself inclined to agree with Neil Henderson's comments concerning *originality*. With regard to subject matter, everything that can be said with regard to the human condition, has been said; anything that is written at this stage—even if it appears original at first glance—can only be a variation on archetypal concepts that have already been expressed. Our only hope is to be able to hold our heads up with a certain degree of pride when examining such issues; for instance, to write convincingly about dangerous, unrequited love with *Death in Venice* looking over our shoulder; to examine the unmotivated crime in the shadow of Andre Gide, or alienation after Jean Genet.

What I'm trying to say here is that true *experimentation* is extremely rare these days. It seems to me that quite a few editors (and readers) have a somewhat fuzzy idea of what experimentalism is. To my mind, it is the majority of Samuel Beckett's work, particularly his short prose, or Joyce's *Ulysses*, particularly the forty-page sentence with which the book concludes—now *that* is stream-of-consciousness, and I must say I don't know what the bloody hell those editors who spoke to Neil Henderson were talking about when they said that slipstream was the *new* stream-of-consciousness. It seems to me that you won't get a 'new stream-of-consciousness' until you get a new consciousness, and that's still probably several thousand years down the line for Homo Sap.

I believe that if we wish to conduct literary experiments, we must continue to examine *form* rather than *content*. It is not enough to dispense with plot: those experiments have already been conducted many times. I don't mean to say that I don't want to read any such fiction (I do!), but rather that we should not sit back and proudly proclaim such fiction to be experimental. Forty years ago, it might have been, but not any more.

from Paul Doran

I reckon TTA5 was my favourite issue to date. There seemed to be a considerable slant towards horror/dark fantasy—which is a good thing as far as I'm concerned. Each story, in its own way, began where something wasn't quite 'right' and quickly plunged into a dark place where everything was very 'wrong'. And scary. I like Dave Mooring's artwork very much. It has the same, subtle, unnerving qualities also present in much of the fiction.

As for the anthology debate—it's a tough one isn't it. With regard to my own personal situation, having only missed out on TTA1, I have to be honest and say that unless the anthology contained most of, or all of, the fiction from that issue I might feel a little reluctant to part with my cash for a collection of stories I've already read. Maybe if you included some previously unpublished material? And more of Dave Mooring's art? Anyway, obviously I would like to see the anthology happen and be a great success—who knows where it could lead?

•The anthology would undoubtedly contain some stories from TTA1, but I fully realise that those people who have seen all issues would really only buy the book simply for the sake of owning it. It's hard to believe, I know, but there are a lot more non-subscribers than subscribers, and they are the target audience. That the anthology should contain some unpublished fiction is an idea I've considered, but I think really that's a different anthology. As for Dave Mooring, well, he is the obvious candidate for the cover artwork, and has in fact already agreed to do it.

from Cheryl Spooner

Thanks for TTA5. I've only managed to read a couple of the stories so far, both of which are excellent (especially Rick Cadger's moving *A Breath of Not Belonging*), but that's not the reason I'm writing: I felt compelled to congratulate you on your choice of artwork for this issue. When I took the magazine from its envelope to find myself face to face with Dave Mooring's *Cry Wolf* I was taken aback by the sheer power of the image. There is real torment in those haunting eyes, real pain etched in every plane of that striking face, and each time I pass the table where it lies I find my eyes drawn to the cover. What else can I say? The man has real talent. I seldom take any notice of artwork in magazines, in fact I find illustrations annoying as a rule because they never quite fit the image the story evokes in my mind's eye. I do, however, like the idea of a featured artist, especially as you allow the artwork to stand on its own merits rather than detract from both story and picture by lumping them together.

I must admit that the idea of an anthology sounds great, just as long as the anthology represents the diver-

sity of the magazine. Mind you, I wouldn't like the task of trying to make the selection, even from the few I've read in TTA4 and 5. One idea would be a readers poll. I know it's all been done before, but it might be easier to select from the most popular than from the whole lot.

**I have to admit that I do already have in mind a short list of stories drawn from the first eight issues, but it would still be interesting to hear from more of you regarding your favourite stories so far. I don't wish to turn this into a poll, mind.*

from Denina Hudson

I love the artwork in TTA and feel that it embellishes the readers' imagination. The covers are always riveting, TTA5 particularly. Anyway, why should writers feel they alone have sole right to be heard in the small press? Artists no doubt struggle to be 'heard' just the same as any aspiring writer. More power to you for giving them a 'voice'.

Of the stories in TTA5 my favourite was *The Ties That Bind* by Mike O'Driscoll. What a brilliant writer; he had me rapt from the start. He gave an obvious clue to the ending in his first paragraph yet, because he involved my attention so cleverly with his unfolding story, it still came as a surprise.

from Bernard O'Brien

TTA5 left me, as do all the others, completely unsettled. Having had many years to build preferences and prejudices, it is a fair exercise to read the stories and poems with what I fondly believe to be an open mind. From time to time I wince a bit at some piece of stretched imagery but even if I do, I find the standard of the works very high. The tales seem to be somewhat morbid and in TTA5 there are at least seven metamorphoses; none of them very pleasant. Is there no levity? But then, who wants happy endings?

The artwork is excellent. I'm glad you have not resorted to collages or montages. These can be provocative but often fall into clichés with helmets, crucifixes, swastikas, daggers — bloodied or not — and the obligatory stretched-out unclad female. All very powerful symbols but vastly overdone. What Dave Mooring produces chimes easily with the ambience of the magazine.

from Duncan Barford

The stories I enjoyed the most were by Julie Travis and Mark McLaughlin. I relished the powerful atmosphere of oppressive weirdness McLaughlin created in his accomplished, simple tale. Julie Travis' story I thought extremely well constructed: the sense of the heroine gradually pulled into the horror by its tugging at the tendrils of her own suppressed past was skillfully conveyed (it was also shamelessly filmic!). As well as these, I enjoyed Rick Cadger's compassionate evocation of his alcoholic, 'underclass' hero, although I was a bit unsure what the end of the story meant (for Thomas, as well as for the reader). There were a couple of stories that left me strangely unmoved, although this had nothing to do with the quality of the writing. Mike O'Driscoll's characterisations and portrayal of small-town prejudice were very

vivid (and brilliantly economic in terms of wordage). But I couldn't help feeling there was something a little ritualistic and perfunctory about the tale; I think it was the semi-spectral presence of the inviolable, unstoppable killer that did this, and the ending reinforced my impression: 'all in the mind...as if it never happened at all'. P.J.L. Hinder's writing I found very impressive, stylistically, but otherwise it left me feeling a bit blank.

I prefer strangeness and weirdness to mutilation and gore, and felt that the latter perhaps outweighed the former, but, overall, an awe-inspiring collection. Many thanks!

from Steve Urwin

I must say that *The Guinea Worm* by Julie Travis is the best short story I've ever read in a magazine. I was totally overwhelmed by its power. The opening passages describing the photographs stunned me. Julie's descriptions were so vivid, the torture and murder scenes amazing. The story did have a strong cinematic feel to it and it's not surprising someone's interested in making a film. Whether it would pass the censors is another matter altogether. Something cold and precise about it. Not like a 'genre' shocker piece of entertainment. A very disturbing quality. Almost like documentary footage. She should have a collection published. I'd love to see more of her work.

from Andrew Hook

When I saw the change of subtitle from 'crossgenre fiction' to 'cutting edge horror...' I became worried that you might be moving away from your initial ideal for the magazine; which I felt was just to have a good selection of quality stories, whatever the genre. *[Actually, it wasn't. My aim has always been to publish cutting edge horror, fantasy and sf, and I think that slipstream or crossgenre fiction is at that cutting edge. Nothing has changed. The term 'crossgenre' was actually indirectly suggested by Ellen Datlow: 'less catchy than slipstream but more accurate'. However, after discussing these things with those more experienced than me (see below), I began to feel that the term sounded dull and vague, hence the new subtitle.]* But as it turns out TTA5 was very enjoyable indeed. Rick Cadger's story was a good opener where any strangeness was implicit rather than overboard. It was very easy to relate to the characters despite the circumstances. Mark McLaughlin's *The Food of Love* was a very simplistic story which took one idea and didn't need to embellish it, as it kept the idea to itself until the end. For me the best one though was P.J.L. Hinder's *Day Billion*. Some stories have an intrinsic quality that rubs off on you, and you love them without really knowing why. Perhaps it is better not to be too analytical in these cases, but just re-read them again for pure pleasure. I like stories to be completely off the wall where unreal things are so believable that you both want/not want to believe in them at the same time. Such was *The Guinea Worm*, my second favourite in this issue. The images were gruesome, but not for the sake of it, you felt there was a really intrinsic evil at the heart of it (us). The ending was inevitable I suppose, and so did disappoint, but I can't see how it could have finished any other way.

Letters

from Mark McLaughlin

TTA5 looks marvellous! The cover art is great, and the subheading 'cutting edge horror, dark fantasy & sf' sums up the contents well (for readers who judge a book—or magazine—by its cover, as we've discussed before). And, I like how all the words on the cover frame the art subtly. A very professional look. Liked Joel Lane's *Hard to Find* (what a great last line); enjoyed the freaky *Cavefish*; *Floaters* had the best first line in the issue; liked Peter Crowther's sad, dreamlike poem; *The Guinea Worm* was very powerful — full of dark elegance and brooding viciousness. Ms Travis has a bright future in dark fantasy.

from Murray C Steward

Was it a coincidence that several of the stories in TTA5 dealt in one way or another with transformation? Regeneration and renewal were always potent themes in fiction (especially in fantasy, for obvious reasons), and seem to grow ever more prevalent, even in mainstream writing, as the Millenium approaches. Coincidentally?

In *The Ties That Bind* Mike O'Driscoll took a storyline that was, to be fair, not startlingly original, and invested it with a real sense of inescapable Doom. The characters' names had an almost Biblical resonance that helped create and sustain a kind of mythic atmosphere. My only minor criticism was the occasional and apparently arbitrary shifting of tense from past to present. This aside, the story was first-rate, powerful stuff. Powerful in a more

up-front sense was Julie Travis' *The Guinea Worm*, which proves that graphic descriptions of visceral horror can also be effectively eerie and nightmarish when placed in the right context. I can see how this would work very well as a film, given a sympathetic treatment without the ham-fisted rock video flash that afflicts many modern horror movies. Watch out, Clive Barker! While coming from the opposite end of the fantasy spectrum, Rick Cadger's gentle *A Breath of Not Belonging* also held a certain cinematic quality. The character of Thomas was carefully built up into a touchingly real portrait of a man seemingly doomed to spend his future atoning for his past. The strikingly bizarre premise of Mark McLaughlin's *The Food of Love* wasn't quite carried through to the Giant Wasp ending, which was a bit 1950s; still an enjoyable piece though, and it was nice to find a lighter story among all the horror and psychodrama.

My favourite poem this issue was Peter Crowther's beautiful *Beyond the Window*, which surpassed even his *Other Trains* from TTA1, for my money one of the best poems ever to appear in TTA.

On the question of the hypothetical 'best of' anthology...a paperback format might ensure wider distribution through selected bookshops, and would probably be more accessible to potential buyers who still fight shy of indie mags. Perhaps the anthology could be offered to subscribers at a slight discount, if economically feasible.

• Yes, I think that's an excellent idea!

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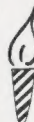
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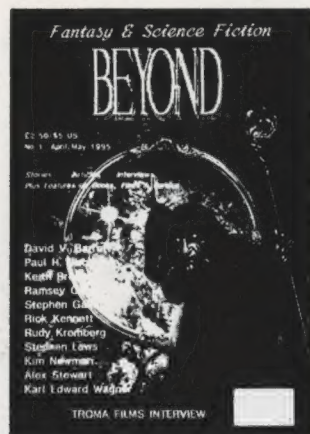
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